Second Sunday of Easter

Often a little information about how things worked back in the 1st century can be very helpful in understanding the scriptures a bit better. They didn’t have Barnes and Noble back then.

When John wrote his Gospel, paper and parchment were very expensive commodities. Every copy of a book had to be hand copied. If I were writing a book today, longer would be no issue. Why only 100 pages? 200 or 300 hundred is no problem. Not so in the 1st century. I’ll come back to that in a minute.

What John does right from the start of his Gospel is to introduce characters: John the Baptist, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel. In each case, as succinctly as possible, he helps us watch their journey of faith. Fr. Francis Moloney describes that journey as moving from no faith, to partial faith, to complete faith.

Complete faith seems like too high a bar to me. I would rather call it moving from not knowing Jesus, to having some idea about who Jesus might be, and being drawn to him, to trusting that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and finding new life in his name. From a first encounter, to becoming friends, to discovering who he really is for me!

John gives us plenty of folks, and we can identify with the journey of any of them, and see how it might help us understand our own journey. There is Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind, Martha, Mary & Lazarus; we had Mary Magdalen on Easter, and today, Thomas. Through the communion of saints, we can even ask their intercession, asking them to help us in our journey.

In the case of the various characters John provides for us, he shows us how coming to know and love Jesus as our Lord and Savior involves stages. At the beginning, there is an encounter with Jesus in some way, whether in person, as the folks I just named, who were part of Jesus’s time on earth, or through preaching and the Gospel: the blessed folks like you and me, who eventually come to believe without seeing.

So let’s work with Thomas a bit.

In our Gospel today we heard Thomas say: “Unless I see the mark of the nail in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and my hand into his side, I will not believe.” I don’t know how you hear that, but it sounds pretty coarse to me. Rude even. Confrontational perhaps. It doesn’t immediately endear me to Thomas.

But what if John wasn’t concerned about the length of his Gospel, and gave Thomas a bit more space in the text. What if, rather than one quick sentence to cut to the chase, Thomas said something like this:

“I hear you guys. I can see you really believe Jesus rose from the dead. Something must have happened. But rising from the dead? Appearing to you alive? Seriously! That is just too hard to believe. I’m not there. Maybe if I see him myself, that will change, but without it, I just can’t believe. I need to see the evidence -- the nail marks, the wound in the side.”
Ok, that is me re-imagining the story, but in case you question the idea that John tried to pack things in tightly as he wrote, think about this. Thomas goes from not believing, to the deepest understanding of Jesus in the entire Gospel, when he calls Jesus “My Lord and my God.” All in two sentences! Last Sunday, the beloved disciple peered into the empty tomb and believed, in one sentence. This Gospel certainly doesn’t drag the story out! Teaching, maybe, but not descriptions of events.

Sometimes the journey from encountering Jesus to becoming a believer and disciple in John’s Gospel is compressed into one scene, as the woman at the well, or the man born blind. In other cases, the person appears near the beginning, shows up briefly in the middle, and finally is a disciple at the end, like Nicodemus, in chapter 3,7 and 19. But there is always movement, a process, a journey. Meeting Jesus. Realizing there is something special about him. Then experiencing a life-giving relationship, or as John puts it in today’s passage, coming to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through this belief, having life in his name.

Now this is all fine and dandy anyone might say, but wait: all those people had a chance to see the risen Lord with their own eyes. I don’t. How do I make that journey, without seeing? Well, John tells us he has written his Gospel so we may come to believe, and that those who believe without seeing are blessed. Here are some possibilities.

I go from not knowing anything about the Bible, to reading it or listening at Mass. I realizing this is no ordinary book from the book store. Then I come to realize it is the living Word of God! It can change how I understand and experience the world. Through a journey with the Bible, I come to know, and love, and become a disciple of Jesus. I encounter him through His Word.

Or let’s say I know next to nothing about prayer. Then I give it a try, and start to realize this really is something. Next I experience that this thing called prayer is a very real encounter with the Lord. Through it I can discover God’s will, experience Jesus’ love and forgiveness, it can open the door to the Father, Son and Spirit working in my life and living in me.

Or I come to Mass, but without much understanding. Then something grabs me, and I begin to tune in a bit more. Next thing you know, it is Jesus I hear speaking right to me in the Gospel, or I hear him speaking right to me in the consecration: this is my body, given up for you.

In each case, we can have a journey from encountering Jesus, to getting to know him, to a friendship that changes everything. Let me go back to Thomas one more time. What might he say to us today? As I imagine Thomas talking to me, here is what I hear:

“You know Bob, (I told him to call me Bob) …. You know, Bob, I had the courage to admit my questions and doubts, to ask for what I thought I needed, and as a result, Jesus gave me so much more, something I so, so wanted: faith! I could believe even without touching those nail prints. So if you want my advice, ask your questions. Don’t hide from doubts. Don’t let your doubts or what you don’t understand make you question yourself. Doubts and questioning sure worked for me!

And Bob, let folks know this too. It is not an accident that that first appearance of the risen Lord, the one I missed, was on the first day of the week. That day I came to believe was also the first
day of the week. Those times when we came together on a Sunday were tremendously important. So important that believers have been doing it ever since. Get together on the Lord’s Day with people who know him, or even simply want to, and the next thing you know, he is there! That thing about ‘where two or three are gathered in my name’ worked right from day one!”

Well, that is what I heard Thomas saying to me. Please, take the time to see if he has anything to say to you this week.

And in light of Thomas’s last point, as I said on Easter Sunday, I am really glad you are here! So is the Lord, and he won’t send us home empty-handed.