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Emmanuel, Staunton

This text is a jumping off point for the preached sermon. The text may differ from the sermon as delivered in the pulpit.

Good morning.

It is good to be with you on this second Sunday of the Resurrection.

This morning we encounter the Risen Christ. He appears to his disciples, coming through the shut doors and speaking to the hearts of his friends that are locked by fear and grief.

It is in this context that we meet Thomas - often called Doubting Thomas.

I've never understood that nickname. Thomas asks for proof once and he is forever labeled as Doubting Thomas.

Nevermind that he shows up two other times in John's Gospel.

In the eleventh chapter of John, Jesus and his disciples learn that their friend Lazarus has died. Jesus says, "We should go back to Judea to see him and his family."

Now the disciples remember that the last time they were in Judea, the Pharisees had tried to kill Jesus, so they are slightly reluctant, but Thomas - our own Doubting Thomas - says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Bold. Faithful.

Then, in chapter fourteen, Jesus tells the disciples that he must go ahead of them to prepare a place for them in his Father's house, where there are many mansions.

Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas is the first to speak up. The first to volunteer to die with Lazarus. The first to want the GPS coordinates of the Father's house.

And when the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples, he is nowhere to be found.

Maybe he was running to get dinner for the gang or maybe he was preparing his things for the trip to his mansion in heaven.

Perhaps he was grieving.

Wherever he was, Thomas missed out and when the disciples tell him what happened he is not having it.

Again, can you blame him?

"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.", Thomas says, and with good reason.

He had watched as Jesus was arrested and tortured and nailed to a cross. He had fled in terror as his teacher and guide and friend was executed.

Can you blame him for wanting some proof that Jesus was alive? That death did not get the last word? That the tomb was empty?

Can you blame any of us for wanting proof?

Our collect this morning says that God "established the new covenant of reconciliation" through the resurrection of Christ.

Reconciliation is the act of bringing things into harmony or making things compatible. We talk of reconciliation between enemies in big things like war or common things like relationships.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we are reconciled - meaning we are brought into harmony: with God, with each other, and with ourselves.

At its core, reconciliation is about remembering the truth. In Christ, we remember that death does not get the last word and the love of God transcends all.

Reconciliation is about remembering that in the midst of our own sin and failures, in the midst of our interpersonal conflicts, in the midst of the hells we create, there is this truth: we are children of God, redeemed by Christ, set free from the power of sin and death.

When we remember this truth, when we are reconciled to each other, to ourselves, and to God, we will have life and have it abundantly.

But reconciliation is hard; remembering the truth is hard.

It has always been hard but it seems even harder now.

In the midst of the political upheaval and the violence in our world, it can be hard to remember that our enemies are beloved children of God.

When we are surrounded by cultural pressure to be better and faster and smarter and more organized and thinner and more, more, more - it can be hard to remember that before we were called anything else, we were called beloved by God.

In the middle of all of this chaos, it is not surprising that we doubt the Good News of God's reconciliation - that we ask for just a little proof.

"Unless I see...I will not believe."

There are many people in the world, in our community, who need the reconciliation of God. People who need to hear the Good News of Christ, but they want proof. They want to touch the body of Christ.

And I have some news: We are the Body of Christ. We are the presence of Christ in the world.

Too often, we lock ourselves in our upper rooms and wait for these seekers to come.

Too often, we hear the command of the Pharisees in our first lesson as an order to us: "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name."

Got it.

We have an entire generation (or two) of young people that are in desperate need of this news, this message of reconciliation, and the church is huddled behind locked doors.

The good news is that the church has been here before.

In the seventh century, there was a missionary Bishop that saw this problem. Sent from the monastery at Iona to serve as a missionary to the North of England, Aidan set out to find the prodigal sons and daughters.

The missionaries that were sent Northumbria before Aidan had failed. They tried the traditional model of evangelism. They set up operations in the royal town centers and waited for the people to come to them.

Much like the modern American church, they built their churches and waiting for the people. And much like the modern American church, they failed.

These missionaries found themselves in a foreign place with a foreign person using a foreign language. They told the people of Northumbria about a foreign religion that required them to accept foreign ways.

The Bishop in charge of this first mission blamed his failure on the people, saying they were too stubborn to be converted.

Soon Aidan was ordained as a Bishop and sent to the stubborn people of the North.

Aidan found great missionary success where all those who came before him had failed because he left the comforts of the monastery and church to walk the roads with the common people.

Sources say, "Aidan would walk from one village to another, politely conversing with the people he saw and slowly interesting them in Christianity."

"By patiently talking to the people on their own level (and by taking an active interest in their lives and communities), Aidan and his monks slowly restored Christianity to the Northumbrian countryside."¹

Aidan and his monks had "been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body" and "showed forth in their lives what they profess by their faith."

In 2015, I started a new young adult community in Roanoke called the Aidan Community. Taking a cue from St. Aidan, we sought to reach out to people who were post-college and wandering - those who perhaps wouldn't come to a church on Sunday morning but who were still longing to connect with God and their neighbor.

We had a newly renovated house next to the Diocesan office in Roanoke that we soon filled with four young adults who live and pray together in community while reaching out to other young adults.

¹ https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Saint_Aidan#cite_note-6

The image we returned to was that of St. Aidan and his monks walking with people, hearing their stories, and telling them the old, old story of God in Christ.

In the coming weeks and months, we will start another Aidan Community here in Staunton. This community will not start as a residential community, like the house in Roanoke, but, instead, will be a gathered community of young adults in Staunton. Connected to both Trinity and Emmanuel, this group will seek to bring together young adults from inside the church and beyond.

Through events, small groups, and worship services, the Aidan Community, Staunton, will serve as a door into faith for those who will not or cannot bring themselves through our church doors first.

Those who, like Thomas, say, “Unless I see, touch, feel the reconciliation of Christ, I will not believe.”

This is the mission of the church.

So what happened to doubting Thomas after he professed Jesus as Lord?

Christian tradition holds that Thomas traveled to India to preach the Gospel. To this day, there are Christians in India that are called St. Thomas Christians. So this apostle, who was so quick to volunteer to die and who has been forever characterized as a doubter, was faithful to the call of Jesus - faithful enough to go to India and to preach the Gospel reconciliation.

Perhaps it time to call him Faithful Thomas, for once he touched the Body of Christ and saw the Resurrected Lord he became the first disciple to proclaim, “My Lord and My God!”

May we be faithful too. May we go out into the highways and byways and find those who need to hear the Good News. May we walk with them and hear their stories. May we humble ourselves like St. Aidan and step out into the world in the power of the Spirit.

May we fill Staunton with the teaching that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we have life in his name.

Amen.