**First Reading Acts 4: 32-35**

*While the apostles testified to others about the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christian community shared what they owned or sold their possessions to help their fellow believers who were in need.*

32Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

**Psalm 133**

1How good and how pleasant it is, when kindred live together in unity! 2 It is like fine oil upon the head, flowing down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, flowing down upon the collar of his robe. 3 It is like the dew of Hermon flowing down upon the hills of Zion. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing: life forevermore.

**Second Reading 1 John 1: 1—2: 2**

*The opening of this letter serves as a reality check. The reality of God is light, but our confessed reality has been sin. God cleanses us from our sinful reality through Christ’s death so that we live in fellowship with Christ and walk in God’s light .*

1We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—3we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. 5This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is

not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 2:1My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

**Gospel John 20: 19-31**

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.” 26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

**SERMON**

Welcome to year 15 of redeeming Thomas in the eyes of the church. In case you don’t know this, I’ve been in ministry now for 15 years. And I said one year in my sermon on this passage that for all of the years that Thomas has been dubbed “Doubting Thomas,” I’ll have to

speak twice as many years undoing that label. This passage from John’s gospel comes up every Sunday after Easter. While I’ve spent a number of years talking about Thomas, it wasn’t EVERY year of my ministry so far. At the beginning, I used to take this Sunday off as vacation!

So here we go again. The apostle Thomas, who appears in our gospel passage today, is never called “Doubting Thomas” in the Scriptures. Never. He is, however, referred to as The Twin. Whose Twin is unclear, but we know that he is referred to that way. Also, while our Bible translation translates Jesus’ words to Thomas as, “do not doubt but believe,” the Greek word that is used could be better translated as “unbelieving.” In other words, “Do not unbelieve, but believe.

Translating Jesus’ words in this way is more in line with the theme throughout John’s gospel of Jesus inviting people from unbelief to belief, inviting people from darkness into light, inviting humanity into relationship with God. In John’s gospel, to believe is to be in relationship with God through Jesus. Thomas’ unwillingness to believe that Jesus has been raised means that, for him, the relationship is over, is cut off. When Jesus appears to Thomas, Jesus invites Thomas from unbelief to belief. And of course, once the risen, wounded Christ stands in his presence, inviting him to touch his wounds, Thomas knows the relationship has been restored, and so he responds, “My Lord and my God!

From the beginning of John’s gospel it says, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.” The witness of the gospel writer is that God came into the world to live among God’s human creation. God came through Jesus so humanity would finally understand that our Creator WANTS relationship with us. While some of the more powerful and influential religious leaders of the day taught about a God who acted more like a selfish human being, Jesus came to demonstrate that God loved differently. God loves those who sin. God loves those who struggle financially and are poor. God loves those who suffer physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, who can’t get it together by our standards. God’s love does not demand perfection. God perfectly loves a flawed humanity.

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus’ teaching is interwoven with stories about individual’s relationship with Jesus…Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Judas, Pilate, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and, in the next chapter, Peter. The point is to convey to us the nature of our faith, which is a relationship with God through Christ. It’s

not about measuring up, or following certain rules, or having the “right” beliefs, or never having doubts…it is knowing that God loves us and is in our lives and cannot be driven away by us. When we sin, God will hear our confession and forgive us. When life gets difficult, and we aren’t sure what’s going on or where God is, God will come to us, just like Christ came to Thomas, to reassure us.

While Jesus had been the one doing the inviting throughout his life, after his resurrection, Jesus passes along this ministry to his disciples. His announcement of “Peace be with you,” is his affirmation that all is forgiven, their relationship with him has been restored. And with another assurance of, “Peace be with you,” Jesus hands over his ministry to his followers, along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, to do what God sent him to do…let all people know of the love of God for all of humanity, especially those who were believed to be cut off from God. And this business in v. 23 about forgiving and retaining sins? It’s not even clear to scholars who study this stuff all the time what exactly this verse means. But whatever it means does not contradict or replace Jesus’ commissioning his followers to go out with the same message with which Jesus was sent.

There are a lot of strange or unusual things happening around us in the past 2 weeks. There was the bridge collapse in Maryland. There was an earthquake in New Jersey, of all places, yesterday. And of course, many of us are looking forward to the solar eclipse on Monday since the path of totality is not far from here. And when strange things happen in quick succession like that, I know there will be those who point to these occurrences and claim that these are all signs from God, who is trying to tell us to repent.

But that’s not how Jesus did it, is it? No. Jesus came into the world to reveal God’s love and invite humanity into relationship with God. So whether things are going just fine or whether strange things are happening, the message of the church AND of followers of Jesus remains the same…God so loved the world, Jesus reveals that love through his death and resurrection, that love and relationship with God is for you and you and you and that love sustains us, strengthens us, guides us in times when strange and even scary things are happening. Ours is not a message of judgement; ours is a message of God’s love. Peace be with you. Amen.