

Year A, Easter 2  
John 20:19-31  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
March 30, 2008  
The Rev. John Spicer

### **Fingerprint Evidence**

If you were here last week for either of the two later Easter liturgies, you may remember the challenge that Fr. Fred gave us in his sermon. He reminded us that Easter isn't about simply agreeing to the proposition that Jesus rose from the dead, nor is it a time just to go along with the crowd and celebrate the coming of spring. Instead, Fr. Fred said, God is challenging us to truly *mean* it when we say, "The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!"

Well, today, our Gospel reading challenges us even a little bit more. We've heard about the disciples seeing the empty tomb. We've heard about Jesus' conversation with Mary Magdalene in the garden. But *we* weren't there. It's all well and good for eyewitnesses to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord," or even "The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia." But the question for us this morning is a little more personal: If I didn't see it, why should *I* believe it?

Eyewitness accounts are important in these stories from John's Gospel. Mary Magdalene shares her report with the rest of the disciples, but the guys don't believe her – until Christ passes through a locked door and greets them in the risen flesh. He shows them his hands and his side, and *then* the disciples rejoice with belief – they're the new eyewitnesses. But one of them wasn't there; and this one, Thomas, stands for all the rest of us. "Maybe you all got to see and touch him," Thomas says, "but *I* didn't." Thomas wants the same level of certainty that the rest of them received. Thomas wants to be able to tell his own story about seeing the risen Lord.

I can identify with Thomas because, frankly, I've always envied people who could tell stories of miraculous encounter with God. Plus, it would be really helpful in my line of work to have a story or two like that. I remember, when I was in the discernment process for the priesthood, Ann and I took part in a mandatory weekend gathering called the Vocations Conference – basically a series of interviews by the diocesan Commission on Ministry to discern whether you have a call to ordination. We all sat in a circle, and we were each asked to tell our story of calling. One man told about how he got drunk at a party and experienced a moment of personal salvation from it – being saved from falling off a balcony, I think, and knowing in that moment that God was directing him toward the priesthood. Then came my turn. It was quite an act to follow. All I had to offer was a persistent, nagging feeling that God wanted me to do something other than being an editor. Not very impressive. I wanted a better story.

And I think I'm not alone. I heard this kind of desire expressed very poignantly by a member of your vestry at our retreat in January. The first night of the retreat, we too were sitting in a circle, sharing our stories of "what brought you to faith in God." Some of the vestry members shared very dramatic experiences of personal encounter, especially through times of healing; for others, their stories of faith were less dramatic but still deeply moving. And then we came to Jessica Fisher, who in that moment stood in for all of us who've ever wanted to see Jesus pass through locked doors, all of us who've wanted to put our fingers in the mark of the nails and *know*, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the story is real and true. Jessica said she felt some envy about the stories she had heard and the moments of encounter that had produced them. "But," she said, "I guess I've never had the opportunity to catch God in the act. The most

I've been able to see are fingerprints here and there." I love those images – and they're deeply scriptural, too: God who comes to us like a thief in the night, God whom we know by the evidence left behind.

So, for those of us like Thomas or Jessica or me, for those of us who *weren't* in the room when Jesus passed through the locked door – what kinds of fingerprints might we look for? I have a hunch that God leaves behind evidence for each of us in whatever ways might best get our attention. But the Gospel reading today gives us some hints as to what we might look for. Here are a couple of examples.

If you're looking for God's fingerprints in your life, you might look for times when you've experienced divine peace in the midst of fear. In the Gospel reading, the risen Christ has found his friends basically cowering in the corner, locking the doors for fear that *they* would be the next ones to hang on Roman crosses. Well, in the midst of that paralyzing fear, Christ embraces his friends with the gift of peace. "Peace be with you," he says – twice, in fact – as he stands among them, assuring them of the power of resurrected life even in the most unlikely moment.

In my own life, I also can recall a moment of peace in a place of deep fear. When Ann and I were in seminary, and Ann was in the midst of her long hospitalization for lupus, there came an afternoon when everything fell apart. Her blood pressure was dropping fast because fluid had built up around her heart, and they took her in for emergency cardiac surgery. They put me in that awful little private room off the ICU waiting area, the place where they put families who are about to get really bad news from the doctor. I sat there alone for a while. Then, into that room came my five best friends from seminary, to wait with me. They all gave me hugs, which was wonderful. But I will never forget the last hug, from my friend Cal. Cal is a former athlete, and he still works out. And when Cal hugged me, it was a serious hug, and one that didn't stop when I would have expected. It was a hug that said, "Do not let your heart be troubled, and do not let it be afraid" (John 14:27). When people talk about being held in Christ's arms, I know exactly how that feels. It feels like a hug from Cal. That was a moment that left divine fingerprints for me.

To find more of those fingerprints, you might also think about moments in your life when you've felt yourself being pushed into places where you never saw yourself going. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus comes to the 11 disciples at their moment of deepest fear, at the time when they understand nothing about what has gone on around them or what might come next. And in that moment when everything is upside down, Jesus shoves them out the door and into the world. Up to this point, they've been disciples, followers of a teacher. Now, Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). These unbelieving cowards have now suddenly become apostles, which means people who are sent somewhere for work beyond themselves.

And in my own life? Well, you've heard enough about my story to know that I never saw myself in this kind of a role. I would have been happy to work as an editor, keeping to myself in a job that didn't demand much of me, living in a college town I absolutely loved. But God shoved me out – out of comfortable work, out of a comfortable life, into a role I never wanted. As a young man, two of the things I hated most were visiting sick people in the hospital and speaking in front of groups. So God sent me out to be a priest. What a comedian. There aren't just divine *fingerprints* on this situation; there are marks on my back from where God had to shove hard.

I would love to be able to stand up here and tell you my story about the moment when Jesus intervened in my life, grabbing me by the scruff of the neck and rescuing me from the edge

of the abyss. I'd love to be able to tell you my story of Jesus showing up so intimately and so immediately that I could never attribute it to anything else. I'd love to be able to show you my video that "catches him in the act."

But mostly what I have are fingerprints. And I think that's OK, actually. Toward the end of this Gospel reading comes the moment in this story that's intended not for the disciples in the room but for us. A week after his first appearance in that locked room, Jesus comes back and gives Thomas the proof of life that he's been looking for. Thomas, suitably impressed, exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Then comes the moment for the rest of us. Jesus looks at Thomas and says, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" And then I imagine Jesus looking into the camera that's filming this scene. He looks *us* in the eye and says, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:28-29)

So, Christ is risen. We can believe it despite the fact that we aren't standing there with the inner circle, watching Jesus come into the room through locked doors, showing us his hands and his side. We may not get the opportunity to put our fingers into Jesus' wounds. But *his* fingerprints are all around us, if we have the eyes to see.