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# **Christian Community: Our Experiential Proof**

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A Sermon By  
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April 8, 2018  
The Second Sunday in Lent  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-04-08-AAA.mp3>.

## Christian Community: Our Experiential Proof

The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Second Sunday of Easter  
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Acts 4:32-35  
Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-2:2  
John 20:19-31

Happy Easter! A friendly reminder that Easter is an entire church season - lasting for 50 days - not just a one-day event. But it is hard to deny the slight feeling of letdown that comes the Second Sunday of Easter. Most of, if not all, the chocolate eggs have been consumed. The Easter lilies are gone. The Easter joy feels a little different this week than it did last week. Things are beginning to quiet down after the solemnity of Lent, the drama of Holy Week and the celebrations of Easter Sunday. And in thousands of churches, the ordinary faithful gather to listen again to the story of Thomas who wouldn't believe without proof.

It's the perfect text for the Sunday after Easter Day. For one thing, the main action of the story takes place exactly one week after that first Easter Sunday (John 20:26). But what truly suits the story to the occasion is the subject matter: on the Sunday after the Resurrection, even the faithful must come to terms with hidden doubts, and decide if faith is real enough for ordinary time.

Our point man this Sunday is Thomas. Christian history has designated him "Doubting Thomas" and given him a slightly negative rap, but the truth is, that on the Sunday after the feast of the Resurrection, he is our go-to guy. We send in Thomas on days like this. For such occasions we call in the hard-nosed skeptic - somebody brash enough to poke around a bit and see if this thing will really hold water.

So when we read that Thomas refuses to believe in the resurrection based on mere hearsay - when we hear again his demand for physical proof, we are of two minds, I think. Our proper, church-going, religious selves wag a knowing finger at Thomas. "Shame on you! And you call yourself a disciple!" But another part of us thrills at the words: "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" (John 20:25). Yes! Yes, and why not? If it's true, why can't we have proof? We want to see. We want to touch. We want to know. We want to experience the resurrected Lord for ourselves. We, like Thomas, want only what Jesus' other disciples already experienced. We want to be there.

This desire for experiential proof is completely normal. Proof is what everyone prefers. But we weren't there. We are 2,000 years removed from the historical event. We must come to terms with our place in history. God, in God's manifold wisdom, has not ordained that we should "be there" no matter how sincerely and audaciously we wish it. We live in an age of wonders, no doubt, but when it comes to resurrection faith, ours is not the dispensation of sight.

At least not in terms of seeing the crucified and resurrected body of the 1st century Palestinian man, Jesus of Nazareth, as his first followers saw him. Most of us have not had a Thomas and Jesus moment. But, that doesn't mean we haven't experienced the risen Lord, or that we won't. There are other ways to experience the risen Christ, besides seeing the mark of the nails in his hands, and putting our fingers in those marks and in his side. Yes, there are other experiential proofs for us 21st century Christians that Christ is alive. Chief among these proofs is the Body of Christ, his church. In Christian Community, we see and know and experience the risen Lord.

It is no coincidence on this Second Sunday of Easter, that a key message in all of our scripture readings is the power of Christian community. One of the hallmarks of the risen Christ, one of the proofs of his existence, was his capacity to draw individuals into authentic life together in his name.

In our Gospel text today, the risen Christ appears to the Twelve, not only to quell their distrust, but also to unite them as a disciplined community. In Acts, the power of Jesus' resurrection graces the early church with an uncommonly open heart, out of which every material need is satisfied. Psalm 133 accents the joy of community: "How good and sweet it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity" (Psalm 133:1). And lastly, 1 John is a candid yet encouraging meditation on life in a community whose Lord is Jesus. At the core of this community is love. In the five chapters of 1 John, love is mentioned 35 times, that's 7 times per chapter. Love of the Lord Jesus, and love of others for his sake, is at the heart of Christian community, which finds its meaning in the crucified and risen Christ. This sort of Christian community, with love at the core, is our experiential proof of the resurrected Lord.

We hear about it throughout the scriptures of the New Testament but we also experience it today, in the here and now. I see, and know, and experience the risen Lord in this community of Grace Church. I see the risen Lord in peoples' generosity to support our new Refugee Ministry in sponsoring a family in need. I see the risen Lord in people who visit folks who cannot leave their home, bringing them communion and camaraderie. I know the risen Lord through relationships with people who share in trust and confidence their life struggles and joys with one another. I see the risen Lord in new comers to this place, seeking a deeper relationship with God. I see the power of the risen Lord in the way Wade in the Water, our ministry for racial justice, empowers folks to confront privilege and comfort. I see the risen Lord when we, through baptism, welcome new Christians to share with us in the work of our risen Lord and pledge to support them in this ministry, as we will today at our 10:30 service, when we welcome eight new Christians in our midst. The risen Lord is alive and well in this place.

Our experiential proof is all around us. The love and joy and power of the risen Lord surrounds us. When we, his followers, love as he loved and live into his resurrected life, then we become experiential proof. We are witnesses to the power of his resurrection. It doesn't matter that we weren't there. It doesn't matter that we're 2,000 years removed from the event. We, who know the Lord, are able to exclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God" when we experience the resurrected Christ among us. We are called to live into the new life we have in Christ and to declare him and share him with others. May God continue to make us proof of the risen Christ, for those who need it. Amen.