

The stories about the risen Jesus can be difficult to approach. Some people have a hard time accepting the resurrection at all. Others find the Gospel stories to be too sketchy, strange, or disjointed, and just can't connect. And reading the brief resurrection accounts after the lengthy passion narratives can feel off-putting or confusing; if the resurrection is so important, shouldn't the evangelists have written more about it? But the thing I love about the resurrection stories, the way I connect with them, is the relationships. While the passion stories are all about a process — a brutal, public process — the resurrection stories focus on personal relationships. While Jesus was accessible to everyone during his public ministry, even his enemies, after he rose from the dead, his work in a sense was complete, and he could choose only to spend time with the people who loved him. Fortunately, Jesus loves imperfect people, and we love him. So in the resurrection appearances, we see God's power and grace connecting with people we can relate to.

Today's Gospel begins in the evening of the first Easter day, with Jesus appearing to the disciples who had gathered, and showing them his hands and his side. This shows that although his body had been transformed, it was still his body. It also shows the foundational importance of community; while Jesus does indeed seek out the lost sheep, his intention is that we encounter him regularly in communities like ours.

But this dramatic encounter may distract us from what happens next. Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is John's version of Pentecost, the giving of divine vitality and authority to Jesus's followers, whom we now call "the Church." While St. Luke depicts the inauguration of the Church by the Holy Spirit in a spectacular scene, and in a venue so public that it represents the whole world, St. John shows the Church starting quietly, in a room full of close friends. Much more relatable.

Just one problem: Thomas isn't there. Anyone who's ever tried to organize a church meeting can relate the frustration of getting every last person to show up. We all can certainly relate to that after the wonderfully high attendance we had last week. It's easy to focus on Thomas's so-called doubt, but the story is really more about Thomas's full incorporation into the community of disciples. We see the beginning of the Church's identity as a community of relational faith. But his doubt makes Thomas relatable; all of us have doubted people and things that were worthy of belief, and who among us wouldn't have doubted the extraordinary claim of the resurrection if we were in Thomas's place, lacking both evidence and experience?

Thomas had been a boldly devoted disciple. When the other disciples expressed their reservations about the danger of going to Lazarus, Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." And when Thomas demands evidence from his friends,

evidence that would back up their wild story, evidence he thought couldn't possibly exist, to me it comes off not so much as skepticism but as the bluster of a man who really, really wishes things were different. Even more relatable.

The Gospel of John was written as the last eyewitnesses of Jesus's earthly life were dying out. The Christians who had become faithful because of their relationships with these eyewitnesses realized that they would have to preserve their stories for future generations, for those who had not seen. Perhaps that is why St. John interweaves Thomas's story with the story of the founding of the Church.

An oral tradition would be necessary and natural but not sufficient; John's community would have to write down their sacred story. Thus, both scripture and tradition are aspects of the spiritual growth of the Church, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Remember this the next time someone tries to start a "debate" about scripture versus tradition: that's a false dichotomy because they are two sides of the same coin, or rather, gifts from the same Spirit.

John portrays this process of growth theologically, yet physically, incarnationally. When Thomas rejoins his old friends one week after the first Easter, on the first Low Sunday, though the other disciples are newly-empowered and encouraged, Thomas receives the gift of faith not from them, but from the risen Christ, meeting Jesus in his authentic, physical presence. Jesus does not chastise him for his earlier doubt, and Thomas's belief dispels his bluster. After receiving this gift, he expresses his new faith with the bold exclamation, "My Lord and my God." This was a bold thing to say, because it was the same sort of talk that got Jesus crucified in the first place. Calling Jesus "Lord" was a rebuke to the empire that insisted only Caesar could be called that, and calling Jesus "God" was blasphemous if false, and a radical, mind-bending reinterpretation of their Jewish faith if true. But both the boldness and the skepticism that Thomas represents are healthy for the Church.

Continuing with the same boldness, the Church has continued to grow in the same way, despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact, that it has always included imperfect people, especially people the secular world would reject or marginalize. Whenever faithful Christians tell others about Jesus, Jesus is indeed there, no matter our own limitations. Jesus is there, not in a symbolic or metaphorical sense, but as an authentic spiritual reality made possible by the same Holy Spirit that Jesus gave to the disciples. He is there, loving outsiders, doubters, even his enemies.

This is why Christians place such emphasis on relationships. The very act of becoming a Christian, Holy Baptism, which Nora Rosenbaum will receive on Saturday, is the

initiation of a relationship with God and the Church. And this relationship begets many others. Only through healthy, honest, life-giving spiritual relationships with Jesus and with other people does the Church expand the presence of Jesus and the Kingdom of God into the world. Only relationships allow those who have not seen to believe. That belief brings openness and searching, which God engages and sanctifies with the enlightenment and strengthening of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit sustains our relationships and leads us to form new ones. Both old and new relationships are essential to the Christian life and mission. Old relationships give us courage and renewal, while new ones are new opportunities to share the grace, peace, and joy of new life in Christ. Both kinds are worthy of time, attention, and nurture; both kinds are conduits for Christ's gift of eternal life.

Relationships are often fraught with difficulties, just as much for us as for the apostles. People can be difficult to approach. But Jesus is no less present in the midst of our difficulties than he was on that first Low Sunday, and his invitation to honest encounter no less powerful. Christ is present in our faithful, longing relationships, now and always. His presence put away the fear, doubt, and division of the disciples. He does the same for us, and so we respond by thanking and praising him, and by following him through whatever the world throws at us.