Well, I’m glad you’re here today. After the harangue and hubbub of last Sunday, the freshness of the “alleluias,” the special decorations, the thrill of new members joining the church, and wonder of baptism, the intimacy of communion, and all the people – the Sunday after Easter is a little like showing up at a party about three hours late. The energy is at a low ebb. Some of the crowd has gone home. The munchies have been pretty-well picked over. It would be a great day for a smart pastor to take a Sunday off.

But, here we are: the chosen, the blessed, the elect. I think God has a place in the divine heart for people who go to church on the Sunday after Easter. I mean, it’s spring, after all, and after a long hard winter, who could be blamed for playing a little ecclesiastical hooky.

And to top it all off, the Sunday after Easter is also the annual visit of the disciple Thomas. Thomas shows us with the same regularity as John the Baptist during Advent. Both of them come for a visit and are about as enjoyable as your weird cousin who looks for change in your couch. Neither one are the kind of people you would invite into your home. We’ve heard their shtick, we can tell their stories, we know what’s going to happen…blah, blah, blah.

So, on this totally and completely anti-climactic Sunday, our job is to find some good news. Our task today is to preach together a sermon on Thomas and to listen to what God might be speaking to us. And we’ll try our best to do it with some energy, some humor, and no small measure of hope. Here we go.
Now, we all know that Thomas has come to be known as “the Doubter,” because of his unwillingness to accept as fact what others had seen and experienced for themselves and that he had, for whatever reason, missed. But, let’s not forget that, according to other gospel traditions and telling, there were plenty of others in Jesus’ circle who rejected the idea of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, but did not believe until she met the risen Christ and heard him speak her name. When she went to tell the disciples what she had experienced, they rejected her words. In Luke’s telling of the Easter story, when the women who had gone to the tomb returned with news of the resurrection, the disciples dismissed them out of hand, with Luke calling the first report of Easter morning, “an idle tale.” In Mark’s telling of the story, no one tells anyone anything, because they all run off in fear.

The simple truth is that Easter morning was greeted with a good deal of doubt and skepticism by quite a few of those who called themselves followers of Jesus. Most of them did not greet the news of “He is risen!” with a great deal of acceptance and excitement. Easter began as a day – a time – of uncertainty and ambiguity. The improbability of it all was overpowering. If they offered a “Hallelujah!” it was offered with a good deal of hesitation.

So, there they were, huddled in fear, behind bolted doors, trying to figure out what was going on. They were afraid of those who had killed Jesus. They may have been afraid of the empty tomb. They may have been afraid of any of a thousand things that God’s people fear from time to time.

And then, right there in their midst, was Jesus. And the first words out of his mouth were, “Peace be with you.” And then, according to the gospel account, Jesus shows his wounds to his friends and they rejoiced and, presumably, believed.

Time passes. It’s a week later and Thomas is, once again, gathered with his fellow disciples. Thomas has made his position clear: “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.” (Jn. 20:25) The point is simple: Thomas wants the same experience that the other disciples have already had.

And there’s a stopping place for us. Let’s sit with that for just a minute. “I want what everyone else already has had.” “I want the same religious – spiritual – faith-building experience that the rest of you have experienced.” Thomas desperately wants to be like the other disciples and have the same faith and confidence that they possess.

That desire is ageless and timeless. I often hear from people how much they want to have a more vibrant and vigorous faith. And if sales records are any indication, watch what books sell like hotcakes whenever they are introduced. Books on prayer, mediation, contemplation, spiritual disciplines, spiritual practices – all of them are usually best sellers.
One of the things I’ve encountered is that people who were raised in the church are usually a little jealous of those who had grand experiences that led them to faith – those that walked the saw-dust path, or went to a crusade, or had a close encounter that led them to God. And people who were not raised in the church usually are a little jealous of those who were – those who can never remember a time when they didn’t know God and God’s love. It’s fascinating that we all tend to talk past each other and never really get to the point of realizing that how we find God isn’t nearly as important as growing in our relationship with God.

Thomas simply wants to have what the others have already received. He wants to experience the risen Christ for himself. He wants to see what others have seen, touch what others have touched. Thomas wants the same assurance that all the other disciples have received: that Jesus lives and that he is Lord and that there is every reason for life to go on.

Why we offer Thomas our put-downs and dismissals really is a bit beyond me. The truth is that most of us want what Thomas wanted. We’re just a little shy to say so. We all want to know the presence of Christ – the resurrected, empowering, enlivening presence of Jesus Christ. We wouldn’t be here this morning if that weren’t at least a little true. We all want to believe. We all want to see what those first disciples saw and, for many of us, that would clean up a lot of our concerns and confusions.

Still, a week later, when the disciples were gathered together and Thomas was with them, Jesus stood among them. Jesus offers Thomas the same proof that the other disciples received. The text gives us no indication of what Thomas did and anyone who offers an answer is engaged in speculation. But the text gives us a conclusion to the story that is exactly what is needed. From the lips of Thomas comes the church’s confession of faith: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas got it exactly right. “My Lord and my God!”

The old saying goes, “Seeing is believing.” It sounds right. But it’s not necessarily true. We believe in lots of things that we can’t see. We believe oxygen is in the air around us, even though we can’t see it. We believe that there are supports holding up the floor beneath us, even though we can’t see them. We believe that tomorrow will come and that it will be Monday, even though we can’t see tomorrow. We believe that this sermon will end soon, though there is no evidence to support that. We believe in lots of things that we don’t see.

Therefore, “believing is not necessarily seeing.” And guess who knew that? Jesus. Jesus knew that there would be many who never saw him, never saw the wounds, never heard his voice, never touched his hand. Jesus knew that there would be plenty of people who never would experience what the disciples experienced first-hand.
That’s what prompted the statement: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” We 21st century disciples may not have seen the nail prints or the scar left by the sword. We may not have heard Jesus’ voice or witnessed the signs he performed. But, Jesus says we are blessed – set apart – touched by God’s mercy and grace – made happy – filled with hope – at peace – because we trust that Thomas and the others experienced all the wonder of new life on our behalf. We trust the validity of their witness. We trust the experience of Christians of every stripe for over 2,000 years. By the way, another word for “trust” is “faith.” We believe – we trust – we have faith – in the One who is “Our Lord and our God.”

So, go a little easy on Thomas. He’s really not all that different from most of us. He wanted to believe what he was told and he wanted to experience what the others had experienced. And Jesus met him right where he was. He offered the proof that was requested. Jesus wasn’t put off or offended.

And to those who would never see, or hear, or touch, Jesus gives to us a word: “blessed.” Blessed are those who believe and have not seen. Blessed, indeed. For now and evermore. Amen.