Truth be told: Doubting Thomas is our spiritual soul mate - the one who speaks for us in the gospel. A few chapters back in the book of John, Jesus speaks cryptically to his disciples about going away and concludes saying “And you know the place where I am going.” Thomas is the only one with the gumption to speak up. He exclaims, “Lord, we do NOT know where you are going! How can we know the way?!?”

In today’s story, Thomas again takes the words out of our mouths. When he hears the claims of his cohorts – that they have seen the Lord, Thomas says, “Unless I see him and touch him, I will not believe.”

Can’t you picture yourself in Thomas’ shoes? It’s that first Easter evening, and the disciples are hiding out for fear of the authorities. You had drawn the shortest straw and had been sent out to get some food for supper, to listen to the word on the street. When you return, your companions are wild eyed, proclaiming that they had seen the Lord! Maybe you’d think it was a sick joke, or that they were hallucinating or perhaps you suspect that they had drunk too much wine. Trying to inject some sanity into the scene, you say, “Waaaaaiiiit a minute! Hold on now! Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and touch the wound in his side, I will not accept this nonsense.”

It must have been a strange and possibly strained week – with the other disciples trying to convince Thomas that they had seen Jesus, and yet possibly wondering to themselves if they were mistaken. Thomas might have vacillated between thinking his buddies had “lost it” and deeply yearning for this absurdity to be true.

A week later it happens again, and Thomas is present this time. Jesus appears in the house, and says, “Peace, be with you!” Then he addresses Thomas saying, “Look at my hands, touch my side. It’s me, Thomas. Do not doubt but believe.” Suddenly our star skeptic, the companion of our souls, does not need tangible proof, and he simply shouts, “My Lord and my God!” In response Jesus utters words which capture the mystery of faith, “Have you believed
because you have seen me?  Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe.”  
And there we are – most of us anyway – those who have not seen Jesus.

While preparing this sermon an old camp song kept echoing in my mind, and challenging my heart.  It goes like this: “Have you seen Jesus my Lord?  He’s here in plain view.”  What about you?  Have you seen Jesus?

Every week or so it seems like someone sees Jesus - the tabloids claim a young Massachusetts woman found Jesus’ face on her French toast, or another woman spotted Jesus peering at her from the bottom of a burnt iron.  A young Brit claims he passed out drunk while cooking and awoke to find Jesus staring up at him from the charred remains of his skillet.  Many of these images of Jesus can be seen in photographs online.  Other eye witnesses tell of beholding a more fleeting image of Jesus – in a cloud, or on the side of a cliff where minerals seep out of the rocks.  While such sightings might be inspirational to some and induce them to believe, I find more fodder for my faith in stories of an incognito Jesus and in the remarkable evidence of the ongoing His work in the world.

What about you?  Have you seen Jesus?  Or have you not seen and wrestle with doubt and belief?  Most of us are in the latter category, but even today there are those who claim to have seen Jesus.  Many are familiar with Anne Lamott’s story in her book Traveling Mercies where she recounts seeing Jesus.  It was a week after her abortion, when Annie had come home drunk, that Jesus began appearing in her room – a mysterious, persistent, comforting presence.  She writes, “I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn’t help because that’s not what I was seeing him with.”  Anne Lamott was a reluctant believer, but finally, after feeling cradled in God’s love through the singing at church the next Sunday, she walked home, gave up and let Jesus come into her heart.  We might be Thomas-like skeptics of her story, yet Anne Lamott’s sobriety and incarnate faith evidence how Jesus changed her life.

Mother Teresa has always fascinated me.  She never claimed to have seen Jesus with his scarred hands and side, but vowed that she discerned him daily in all his distressing disguises – as a filthy beggar covered with maggots, an abandoned AIDS patient lying in his own waste, a homeless child eating litter off the street.  Recently stories have surfaced of the doubt Mother Teresa suffered at times, but her life was nonetheless a living testament to Jesus’ words: “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.  For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me.”

That old camp song says that if you’ve stood in the ocean or watched a sunset, then you’ve seen Jesus.  I’m not sure how it makes that leap, though surely the beauty of creation reflects the grandeur of our Creator.  For me it’s the last verse, which best describes how we continually see Jesus - that is, how we usually experience the living Christ.  It goes:

Have you ever stood in the family,  
with the Lord there in your midst?  
Seen the face of Christ on each other?  
Then I say, you’ve seen Jesus my Lord.
Fortunately God gives us glimpses of Jesus everyday –
in the steady and caring presence of a neighbor,
in the buoyant joy of a child,
the compassionate care of a hospice nurse,
in the calm and gentle support of a Stephen Minister,
the forgiveness of a friend,
the deep wisdom of a parent
the loving anonymity of a blood donor,
the sacrificial risk of a rescue worker.

Like Thomas we want to see and touch Jesus. Yet it is Jesus who touches our hearts
beckoning us to see him, as He sets about unlocking the barriers we have built up in our lives.
While the disciples hid behind locked doors out of fear, Thomas first shut his heart to the gospel
due to demanding tangible proof. Likewise, we too may find ourselves immune to Christ’s
presence by plaguing doubts, and the power of our own fears. We may be afraid that a loved one
will fall off the wagon, or that the lab results will read malignant, or that our name will be issued
in the next set of lay-offs. Our hearts may be locked down by grief, bitterness, or depression.
We may be shut off from life by illness, job loss, a devastating divorce, or a persistent and
paralyzing anxiety. But Jesus continues to breathe new life into our lives with peace,
forgiveness, power and love. Christ relentlessly reaches out to heal the wounds of our hearts, to
forgive whatever haunts our souls, to summon us to live lives of compassion and peace.

John’s Easter truth is that we are blessed with a God who defies the locks of our doubts
and fears. God comes to us, blesses us with the peace of Christ, and sends us out to be a
blessing – the body of Christ in the world, feeding, healing, forgiving. May God give us faith to
discern Christ among us, so we too may declare, My Lord and my God!

Let us pray:

Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord. Open the eyes of our hearts. We want to see you. We want
to serve you. Amen.

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i Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.) pp. 49-50,
ii Susan Andrews, from her March 1999 sermon “Jesus Appears.”