It started like this: I thought, “How many times have I read, if not preached on, this marvelous reading from John’s gospel?”

And marvelous here is not a figure of speech, as in, “You look mah-vah-lus,” but literal: the reading is peppered with marvels, beginning with Jesus’ making an appearance after his death. For another thing, he apparently walks through walls or locked doors. Marvels. There’s also the marvel of turning a skeptic, Thomas, into the first proclaimer of Jesus as divine: “My Lord and my God!” he says, after having said only a week earlier, “I don’t believe. You guys are shining me on. I won’t believe it, unless I see for myself.”

Yeah. Okay, the marvelous reading. But how often? It finally dawned on me a few years ago that we read this same reading every year on this date—the Second Sunday of Easter, being the first Sunday after Easter Day.

So, to my original question: how many time? It’s simple math—46 since my ordination.

That set me off on another search. How long has the Church been appointing this particular reading for this particular day? At least as long as the Book of Common Prayer has been around, since 1549, and I suspect that it was a long time before even that.

So through the centuries it has been deemed appropriate to read this story about marvelous acts and skeptic turned true believer on the very first Sunday after the most important celebration in the Christian calendar, the resurrection of Jesus.

Though I’ve mentioned him several times already (because it’s just so hard not to), Thomas is not my focus today. I would guess that on 80%--maybe 100%--of those years I mentioned I’ve talked exclusively about him as the most important player (aside from Jesus, of course) in today’s story. How can we not feel a kinship with this disciple who blurts out what so many others have silently thought—“I can’t believe it.”

But I’m not talking about Thomas today, right? (You do have to wonder, though, if he’s the reason we’ve been reading this passage for hundreds—well over a thousand—years.)

Enough! It’s the setting and timing that really grabbed hold of me this time.

The passage begins, “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week . . .” that day—the day of Jesus’ resurrection. It had been a busy day: the verse just before that one is “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord;’ and she told them that he had said these things to her. That morning.

So . . . that day, the one we know as Easter Day. Maybe that’s why bishops and councils have scheduled this reading as they have. Just to drive that home. The second part of our reading, when Jesus returned for Thomas’s sake, was a week later. Today, in other words, just two thousand years ago.

That’s almost a shivery kind of moment as far as I’m concerned. When he comes to them the second time it was just like our coming together (albeit virtually) this second time to celebrate the paschal mystery, the resurrection.

Back to the first visit, that first day—the day: It would be significant, to note, I think, what he chose to do and say on his first real appearance, or planned appearance, to the gathered disciples. I think they and we are meant to pay particular attention.

We’ll put it in slow-mo. After we’re told that he couldn’t get in because the doors were locked,

* He gets in. No big fanfare about this. John simply says he came and stood among them.
* Stood among them. Under impossible circumstances. He just stood among them. Rather like standing among us, even in this moment when we can’t stand next to each other. He stood in the midst of them. With them in their fear and isolation. They were hiding out from the corrupt bullying religious authorities who wanted to bring them down. Talk about marvelous—the marvel of standing in solidarity with frightened people sheltering in place. [As I write this I can’t help but wonder how the disciples might have reacted to what we’re doing right now. If someone tried to describe to them a bunch of people separated by more than a day’s journey (because that’s how long distances were measured) and yet still together somehow, seeing each other, hearing each other. A marvel, they probably would say—a marvelous thing.] And here we are, as they were, with Jesus standing among us. So: he came, he stood.
* The third verb her is he said. There must have been many occasions on which Jesus opened his mouth to speak and the people present might have frozen in their tracks, held their breath to hear what would come out of his mouth. I don’t consider it wild speculation to think that this was one of those moments. That is, if they even had time to wonder. Well, he came, and stood among them, and *said*: “Peace be with you.” And there it is; if they had been waiting with bated breath to hear his first resurrection pronouncement, here it is: Peace be with you. Peace.
* “Showed”is the next verb up. He showed them his wounds, his *bona fides*, his I.D. as Messiah. Yep, it’s really me. Look at this. My being here with you, standing among you, showering you with God’s peace—all this has come at a price. And I’ve willingly paid that price in order to be with you here today.
* In case they hadn’t gotten the message—or were too overwhelmed to take it in—he repeated himself: “Peace be with you. Peace.” He repeated it again a week later.
* Last verb in this encounter: He breathed on them. Reminiscent of God’s kneeling over the clay figure beside the river at creation, breathing it into becoming the first human being. Jesus breathed on them and said, “Forgive.” Okay, he actually said, “If you forgive sins, they’re forgiven, if you don’t, they’re not.” But let’s face it: his whole life before death and after resurrection is about forgiveness. With his dying breath he prays for God to forgive his crucifiers. So, “Forgive” is what we’re told here.

In what I’m about to say, we can substitute “us” for “them.”

He came to them. Miraculously.

He stood among them. In solidarity.

He spoke to them about peace.

He showed them the price of discipleship.

He breathed his spirit onto them, into them, transforming them into agents of forgiveness and love.

And all this before Thomas opens his yap.

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