

Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2021
“Marks of Love” (John 20:19-31)

If you were to examine a piece of fine silver, you would find on it somewhere markings placed there by the jeweler or manufacturer. These markings are called hallmarks. They are given that name because, many years ago, all items made of silver – whether pots, dishes, trays, utensils or jewelry – were produced by a member of a guild or union. Those guild members met and worked in large rooms, called Halls.

Hallmarks are etched or engraved into every item for two reasons. The first is to show that the item is actually what it appears to be; that it is, in fact, an item made of pure silver and not mixed with any cheaper materials. A hallmark, then, is a guarantee of quality and purity. The second thing a hallmark tells us is where the product originated; in other words, which hall produced it and, in some cases, the individual who made it.

All this business with hallmarks started in the year 1300 when King Edward of England passed a law declaring that no precious metal could be sold without a guarantee of its purity being marked on it. Not only did British manufacturers use hallmarks of letters or initials, but often there was a crest incorporated into the marking. A leopard’s head, for example, would indicate that the item came from the London hall. A castle would tell us it came from the Edinburgh hall. So, from 1300 to this very day, the practice of hallmarking has continued in one form or another.

The reason I have gone into all this detail about hallmarks is because hallmarks can help us to understand today’s gospel. Today we heard about the Apostle Thomas – Doubting Thomas as we have come to know him. Now Thomas had not been with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them after the resurrection. And when they told him about it, his first reaction was a very normal one: he did not believe it.

Thomas had a healthy skepticism and, like most people who have a healthy skepticism, he would not believe until he first had some proof. And he didn’t hesitate to tell the others that: *Unless I see the mark of the nail in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.* Had Thomas been an American, he would have certainly been from Missouri, the *show me* state – a state in which most people of this world live, at least in the spiritual sense.

Most of us, no matter what is said about how blessed it is for us to believe without seeing, really want to see first. Like Thomas, we want some evidence before we accept what other people tell us as truth, particularly when they are telling us things that seem impossible. Thomas would not believe until he, himself, saw the marks on Jesus.

Now, I don’t think any of us can fault him for that, particularly since he was being confronted with a story that pushes the human imagination to its limits. But we do know how the story of Thomas resolved. Jesus appeared again to the disciples a week later and the first person to whom he spoke after extending peace to his disciples was Thomas. *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.* And Thomas, upon seeing the Risen Christ, believed and said to him, *My Lord and my God.*

Tradition has it that Thomas, later in life, became the apostle to the nations east of Israel, and that he died a martyr's death in India. Because he saw the risen Lord with his own eyes, he believed. He believed and went forth to do what all the other disciples did. He went forth to spread the good news about Jesus: that Jesus died so we would know the love of God and that he rose for the dead so we might know that God's love is forever and that all who follow him receive eternal life.

But what about today? What happens today to those who want proof-positive before they believe, before they say to Jesus, *My Lord and my God*? How can we expect all the people from Missouri to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead and persuade them to become his disciples without providing them with some evidence, some proof that it really happened?

Of course, we could tell them what Jesus said to Thomas after showing him the marks of his death: *Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* But I don't think quoting that verse to a skeptic would help very much. Words won't go very far in making a convincing argument. We see that from our story this morning. The other disciples' words were not enough to satisfy Thomas and make him believe. He needed more.

So, if words aren't enough to make a convincing argument, what proof or evidence are we to offer? Jesus commissioned us, after all, to go into all nations and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Surely, God has equipped us with something we can show in order to convince the world of our genuineness. Surely, there is a hallmark others can look for.

For those first disciples, it was easy to believe. The risen Lord stood there in front of them and showed them the hallmark of his love: the marks of the nails which held him to the cross for their salvation and ours. He presented the marks of his love to them so that they might believe and go forth as his apostles to baptize and make disciples. He showed them the hallmark of his love so that the blessings which come through faith in him might become available to more people.

Today that task is given to us, those who have not seen, yet have come to believe. Or, have we seen? We certainly have not seen the hallmark of Jesus love in his physical body, but we have seen it in and through the people of his church, the body of Christ in the world. Through the witness of our parents and other family members, through the witness of our pastors, Sunday School teachers, and other members of Christ's church, we have seen the hallmark of the risen Christ. Whenever the good news has been proclaimed, whenever the hungry has been fed, the poor assisted, the sorrowful comforted, we have seen the hallmark of Christ's love and been convinced that the living presence of Christ is certainly at work in the world.

This is the proof – the hallmark – we have available to us. Doing these same things is proof to others that Christ lives and that we are in fellowship with him. Quite simply, the hallmark we present to the world is a life that resembles Christ's – a life of light, of truth, of faith. But the most notable part of the hallmark of Christ that we bear – when we are truly in him and he in us – is our love for each other, our desire for fellowship with one another, and working in harmony with others despite all the worldly differences that may exist between us.

It's like the experience of a small boy when he went to his first symphony orchestra concert. He marveled at the different musicians as they came onto the stage and sat down. They all seemed so different. Some were young; some were old. Some were thin, while others were heavy. There were women, and there were men. One by one they picked up their instruments and began to warm up by playing a few notes. It sounded like a dozen cats fighting on a hot night. None of them were playing the same notes, let alone the same music. Then the boy saw a man in a long, black coat walk to the center of the stage. He raised a long, thin, black stick and the noise stopped. With a sweep of his hand, the musicians began to play again and the sound this time was incredibly beautiful.

This experience is an analogy not only of the early church, whose members are described in the Book of Acts as being one in heart and mind, but also of today's church and today's believers. We are a people who can make music instead of making noise because we have a conductor whom we can follow. We have Jesus to direct us.

The risen, living Jesus, with nail prints in his hands and feet, is a reality in our lives and in the world. In him, we see the hallmark of God's gifts to us: a love that will not let us go, a light that followest all our ways, a joy that sleekest us through pain. We see the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Blessed are those in whom we saw the hallmark of Christ and came to believe. And blessed are those who see the hallmark of Christ in us and come to believe.

The hallmark of Christ is here today. May we look for it in others, that our faith may grow, and pray that it may be seen in us so that others might come to faith in Christ and experience the same blessings we have of being in fellowship with him. We are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We should never doubt that. And the way we live our lives will be the proof many others need to believe that Christ is alive.

We are the hallmark of his love in the world. So let us go forth from this place proclaiming the good news of Easter: Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia.