

Sermon for Sunday, April 15, 2012 John 20:19-31 "Hey, Wait a Minute...."

A couple of weeks ago, the MegaMillions prize was up to something over \$600 million dollars. Well over the half-billion – with a B – mark. Everyone and their brother was buying tickets, using whatever method of choosing the numbers that they could think of. True confessions: I must admit that I bought one as well, using the ages of my children and the number of years I've been married as the numbers.

No, I didn't win.

But I had a fun conversation with my daughter about what we'd do if by some stroke of cosmic irony I won. We talked about the tithe to the church, then paying off some school loans, then enjoying a new car and such. She talked about setting up a foundation to do charitable things...it was silly fantasy, but it reminded us of the days when we didn't have much money and would fantasize about how wonderful things would be if we won such a prize.

Doug, of course, believes that winning the lottery is the worst thing that can happen. He may be right. It does seem that every time someone hits the big one, they end up in bankruptcy or divorce, with a hundred heretofore unknown relatives asking for funds and decrying them if they don't share. It seems that getting something amazing usually has implications that we couldn't have predicted.

Sure enough, after it was announced that there had been winners, one woman claimed she had it, then couldn't find the ticket, and her co-workers started yelling that they had a deal to share any winnings. Turned out the lady didn't have the ticket after all. Some folks who had a shared ticket made sure they lawyered up and had a financial consultant before revealing they had one of the three winning tickets. They wanted to remain anonymous, no surprise there, and they wanted to protect some semblance of their life before it was changed.

They understood that getting something amazing usually has implications we couldn't have predicted, and they wanted to protect themselves as much as they could, to keep some part of their past life intact. It doesn't always work out, though.

Those disciples huddled in the upper room after Jesus' crucifixion and death, his burial, and his disappearance from the tomb most likely spent many hours thinking, "Oh, if Jesus had only lived. If he had been saved by God, by the angels, if he were still among us, it would be alright."

They had heard from Mary Magdalene the fact that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, that the angel had told her Jesus was risen, and then she had seen Jesus in the garden, but who knows if those disciples really believed her?

All they knew was that they were terrified. Their great teacher and Lord had been killed and was now missing from the tomb, and the people who were responsible for Jesus' death were most likely looking for Jesus' disciples, too.

So they were hiding, wondering what would happen next, wishing that things could go back to the way it used to be, before the awful things happened.

Wishing, perhaps, that Jesus was with them again, explaining in that wonderful way of his, what they were to do next.

And then, suddenly, Jesus was with them. Standing right there in that locked room. Smiling gently as he always did, looking as he always did, except for the nasty mark of the spear in his side and the nail holes in his hands and feet.

They talked, and Jesus calmed them down, and they felt better. And he left them, as mysteriously as he had appeared.

There was only one problem. One of the disciples was not in the room when Jesus was there. Perhaps he had been sent out for some food, or to go talk to other followers of Jesus, but he wasn't there. Brave Thomas, who was fearless when it came to volunteering to do things and who always asked the questions that people had in their minds but were too afraid to say out loud.

When Thomas got back from his errand, the others told him what had happened, that Jesus had been RIGHT THERE with them, just as it had been before.

And Thomas said, "Hey, wait a minute! We all saw him die. We all saw him wrapped and put in the tomb. Yes, I know what Mary Magdalene said, but it's all a little too weird for me. You guys are getting cabin fever in here. I say it's just your imaginations running wild, a little bit of mass hysteria."

"No, no, it was real! He was here, I tell you!" they cried.

And Thomas harrumphed and said, "You guys are all a little wacko. I don't think he came. I think you imagined it. Unless I see it all for myself...heck, if I FEEL it by putting my fingers in the spear hole and the nail holes, I say it was all a figment of your imaginations. Some guy named Freud is going to describe it as mass hysteria a couple millennia from now...you'll see."

The others all grumbled a bit – that Thomas could be such a stubborn pain sometimes – but they went back to their praying and arguing about what they should do next, given Jesus' instructions to them on his last visit.

And a week passed, and they were still in that room, but this time Thomas was right there. And up popped Jesus, as if he were there all along in that locked room with them. Jesus looked around and said, "Thomas, where are you?"

Thomas was sitting off in a corner of the room, and he looked up, and sure enough, there was Jesus.

Jesus said, "I hear you didn't believe I was here the last time."

"Well, Lord, it sounded pretty incredible to me when the others told me about it. They can be so, so overwrought sometimes!"

"So you didn't believe them, even though I told you all in many different ways that I would be back."

"Well, maybe I thought you were speaking in metaphors or something! You must admit you have a habit of doing that."

"This is no metaphor. I'm real. Come on over. Put your hands into these holes in my body. Feel for yourself."

"Hey, wait a minute...you don't need to do that. I don't need to do that. I can see it's you."

"No, go ahead. I don't want you to think that you're in the grip of some – what did you call it? Mass hysteria?"

So Thomas went over and hesitantly touched the flesh of the Son of Man who was also the Son of God. He put his fingers into the holes.

He was overcome with embarrassment at his doubts.

And Jesus said, "I'm glad you understand now. I know you had doubts. Many people have doubts, even when I've told them exactly what to expect. Others simply believe, and are blessed by that. I didn't want you to have doubts and I cared about you, about your soul, enough to visit again to put those doubts to rest. I love you, all of you, even you, Thomas, and I want to be sure you're sure about following me."

Something amazing had happened. Jesus was truly risen from the dead. He came back to his followers, not once, but twice, to make sure everyone understood and believed what had happened, how he had conquered death.

He did not simply come once and say, "Okay, everyone who got it – you folks are all saved. If you have doubts, tough luck."

No, he loved them, and us, enough to respond to our imperfect faith by making that second visit, by letting Thomas and all of us test out our doubts and perceptions.

When amazing things happen, they challenge us even as they transform us. We may wish that things would go back to the way they were, but they cannot and should not. Instead, we get more than we bargained for, and we must learn to live with what we've received. In the case of the lottery winners, I pray that they can be happy with what they've received, that their lives will only be transformed for the better by this windfall.

In the case of those of us who follow Christ, the risen Lord and Savior, I pray that we recognize how we have been changed, even if we fear we believe imperfectly, by Christ's gift of salvation. I pray that the unexpected consequences for each and every one of us, whether we have doubts or not, will be joy in the knowledge that he will not let us go until he is sure we understand who he is and what he is and what we are as a result.

Thanks be to God for unexpected gifts and unexpected consequences!

Amen.