

## **Second Sunday of Easter April 28 2019**

### **John 20:19-31**

In the Gospel of John, our reading is just after Mary Magdalene has come and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" and has relayed to them all Jesus said to her in that encounter in the Garden outside the empty tomb.

So, this scene starts with Mary just having left, the door closed once again. The fear of being arrested like Jesus hanging in the air, but something else too. This strange, exciting, mystifying report of Mary.

Then, into this steps Jesus. Appearing, there...among them... this assembly of followers who are filled with such a complicated mixture of emotions, hopes, fears, thoughts. And he speaks a word of peace.

Then, having shown them his hands and side, they too rejoice, for now they have seen the Lord.

After their recognition, we get this moment of commissioning, the equivalent of Act's Pentecost moment. Jesus, breathing the pneuma, the breath, the Spirit of God into them. Giving them, as one commentator put it, spiritual CPR. Breathing new life into them. A life filled with the Holy Spirit that gives them new responsibilities and new abilities.

Wow, you could preach on that text for days. But there's more!

Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. One author argues that what the Greek says here suggests that it wasn't just that Thomas was out for a walk, but that Thomas was no longer even part of their company. That

when Jesus, their teacher and rabbi died, he thought, “That’s it. Time to go.”  
After all, the man of the hour was dead. Right?

So, when they are out during the week, the disciples, bump into him, or maybe track him down. One way or the other, they find this once companion, and they announce, as Mary Magdalene did to them, “We have seen the Lord!”.

Thomas’ skeptical response is understandable. After all, while they weren’t given voice by the author of John, it is apparent that none of the other disciples bought Mary’s announcement that she had seen the Lord, any more than Thomas does theirs. Thomas, however, makes it clear what he needs. “I need to see Jesus, the one who still bears the scars of the crucifixion. Unless that happens, I will not believe.”

And yet. Where is Thomas that next first day of the week, that next Sunday? The one who had left them and who does not buy their witness? He is there, among those who have seen the Lord. So, despite what Thomas says, something has changed. Because now he is with them. Again. Even though he says he doesn’t believe any of it.

And what happens in this assembly of followers of Jesus, at least one of whom isn’t sure about any of this? Jesus appears among them... and speaks a word of peace. Then he turns to Thomas. And offers what he had asked. “Walk that hand on over here Thomas and throw your finger in my hands and in my side. Do not become unbelieving, but become believing.”

Thomas’ response, “My Lord and my God”. One of the clearest and most bold declarations of faith in John’s Gospel.

Three things to note here. First, Thomas' response comes apparently without having to do what he said he needed before he would believe, put his hands in Jesus' wounds. The sight of Jesus is enough to elicit his confession.

Second, Jesus doesn't knock Thomas for what he asks for. Doesn't berate him for not believing based on just the witness. Rather, he offers what Thomas needed freely.

Third, remember, the rest of the guys needed this same thing Thomas asked for! Notice how they didn't see the risen Lord until after he showed them his hands and his side?

Belief. It is something we tend to speak about in three ways in the church. The first, and perhaps most unhelpful, is when we associate it with head knowledge. Knowing and understanding all the doctrines, laws, scriptures about God and Jesus.

Second, and this tends to be a Lutheran thing, we talk about it more in heart terms and we tend to use the word, trust. You may not understand this thing, but you trust that it is so.

But I agree with Mark Davis who speculates that maybe in Thomas we see another way of belief. A belief of presence. A belief that is expressed by association...even when you aren't sure you buy any of it.

I would go farther to suggest this belief is one that trusts more in the people who are around you than in Jesus himself. Thomas isn't sure that he buys what his former companions are selling. But he knows them and sees that they are convinced. Perhaps he remembers something of what Jesus taught on the way,

but mostly I think he is there on that Sunday because they believe. And in that moment, their belief is good enough for him.

Each of these understandings is faithful. Each leads to the same thing, the experience of seeing the Risen Lord for who he is. Note also where Jesus shows up, among the assembly of believers on the first day of the week. Even when there are doubters in their midst. Even when they are sacred for their lives, not sure of what to believe. Jesus shows up and offers them his peace.

Do not become unbelieving, but believing. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief! This cry of the father of the epileptic boy is one of my favorite, because it echoes my own faith journey. I know many things about our particular Lutheran expression of the Christian faith. But, as I found out again in continuing ed on Thursday, the more I know...the more I understand how little I know. Head knowledge is good, knowing scripture and the stories of our faith is good, knowing our Lutheran tradition and how it expresses an understanding of God is good. Essential, even. But the head knowledge belief is a small part of the fullness of believing. Because I can believe in something that does not move me to act on those beliefs.

Martin Luther often talks about faith as trust. Trust in God and God's promises. Trust does not require complete understanding or knowledge. In fact, it implies some lack of knowledge. Trust means that I rely on someone else who has knowledge or experience beyond mine. So, in this case, God is a pretty good person to trust. Faith here is that deeper heart movement, that gut feeling of "Okay, I don't get it, but I'm trusting that you know what you are doing."

The difference between these two is probably expressed best. in the story of tightrope walker Charles Blondin. At the height of his skills in the mid 1800's he

was walking across a tightrope over Niagra Falls. After performing some feats including sitting down and cooking an omlette. He asked the crowd if they believed he could make the trip across the wire with someone on his back. “ Yes!” they cried. Charles pointed to one man in front who had shouted the loudest, “Then climb on.” The man declined. So, it was Charles’ manager who made the trip.

The man in the crowd had the knowledge Blondin could do that trip with a person on his back. He believed it. But he did not trust it. Blondin’s manager, may not have believed it. But he trusted it.

But I think the faith of Thomas, is probably the one we affirm the least, but also probably live with the most. This is a faith that may not even know why it is here in the room. Because you just don’t believe what is coming out of the mouth of the preacher. Because none of this makes sense, certainly without some kind of proof. But.... something moves you to be here. Among those who do believe. Either with the assent of head knowledge or the trust in God’s promise from the heart, or both. It is a faith that relies more on the faith of those around them. The trust may not be so much in God, but in them. Your friends, parents, siblings, who believe. You know them. They have not led you astray. So you believe, in them. And show up.

And the promise to all of us, no matter where we are in our faith walk, is that in this assembly of believers on the first day of the week. With those who believe; head and heart, those who aren’t sure, those who don’t even want to be here, those who want to believe but just can’t...that into this assembly comes the risen Jesus. Speaking a word of peace, breathing the Holy Spirit into us. It may come

through the readings, or the sermon, or the conversation you have with your neighbor. It may come as you receive the body and blood of the Risen Jesus-given and shed for you. It may not be something you experience this time, but the next. But the promise is that Jesus is present among us. And that what ever “belief” brings us here... is enough. Because it brings us into this assembly where Jesus comes.

The reality is, that questions/doubt are at the heart of a living and healthy faith. So, here is what I am inviting you to do. In your bulletin you should have found a blank piece of paper. I would invite you to take a few moments now, during the hymn of the day and the passing of the peace, to write down your question(s), your doubts about our faith. What is something you have always wondered? What have you/are you struggling with in your faith life and belief? You don't need to put your name on it. Just fold it over and put it in the offering plate.

As I've been doing with those I've received over the last few years, I'll take a look at these questions and will begin posting responses to them on a regular basis in a variety of formats

On the first day of the week, we have gathered as a community of believers. With faith of all kinds. We gather, not in fear and behind locked doors, but as a gathering of those who “Have seen the Lord” here before, just last week! and are expectantly waiting to see him again. May you have that encounter today, so that you may say with confidence, “My Lord and my God!”