

When Not Seeing is Believing

A sermon preached by

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John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

In 1981 Jimmy Carter returned home to Plains, Georgia after a crushing defeat to Ronald Reagan. It was a short plane ride from Washington, DC to Georgia, but he arrived home to discover that his life wasn't the one that he left when he became President. The campaign that year was principally about Carter himself and the national perception was that his presidency had been a failed one.

He went back home to lick his wounds and re-engage with his peanut farming business. But when he arrived he discovered that the trustee that had been running his business had borrowed over a million dollars in an ill-advised business deal. Carter was essentially broke and he had to find a way to rebuild his life, almost from the ground up. He became a writer and speaker in an era when these activities didn't bring six- or seven-figure honoraria. And he continued to give and serve even in the midst of his own financial struggles. His work for

Habitat for Humanity and human rights won him the Nobel Prize almost 20 years after he returned to Georgia. Today, by most accounts he is one of the most influential and prolific former presidents in our nation's history. In many ways, his story is one about claiming service and faith even in the midst of great adversity.

What do you do the day or the week or the year after a Good Friday or Easter in your life? Do you give in to fear? Do you obsess about what could have or should have been? Or do you claim a new direction, a new mission, a new purpose?

Like Jimmy Carter, this was the question that faced the disciples after Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene had seen the stone rolled away, she had encountered two angels who asked why she was crying, and she had even seen the risen Lord and failed to recognize him until he called her by name. Then she had gone to tell the disciples that Jesus was risen, that he had spoken to her at the tomb. That's where we pick up the gospel lesson this morning. *What do you do the day or the week or the year after a Good Friday or Easter in your life?*

Well, in the case of the disciples you go and lock yourself in a house. And you might ask yourself, "Really? Is this what you do in response to the life changing, life altering revelation that death has no dominion here? You play hide and seek with the risen Messiah? You hide in fearful anticipation that the hope proclaimed by this event is little more than a pipe dream. You huddle behind closed doors for fear that the whole thing is a cruel hoax."

So Jesus seeks out these unnamed disciples. Most translations say that he calls them brothers, but elsewhere the same word is translated as *brothers and sisters*. No matter what others many tell you, the disciples are not just a group of men. He offers them peace, in place of their fears. The fear is so present that he has to say it more than once. It is almost as if he is saying, "Chill out, it will be okay." And certainly that message is something that we need to hear, not just once or even twice, but constantly....peace, peace, peace. There is a *show me your scars* kind of moment, and then Jesus is gone.

Thomas enters the story. When he finally returns to the scene and hears this miraculous tale, his response gives voice to what any normal person would think. He doesn't run out into the street and say with joy and thanksgiving, "Thank God, I knew this would happen all along." Instead he gives voice to the dubious nature of this whole pronouncement. He isn't buying it.

Instead, he has a lot of conditions on his faith. He wants to see the physical remnants of the crucifixion before he is going to sign up for this party.

And who can blame him. We'd most likely act the same way. We'd want to see the evidence, as well. He is pretty adamant that a few lilies and an empty tomb aren't going to cut it for him; he is resolute about these conditions. He doesn't say, "I'll believe it when I see it." He says, "Unless I see it, I won't believe it."

And of course, Thomas gets his chance. A week later Jesus shows up again and this time he does not remain unconvinced.

Jamie Clark-Soles has written that in Thomas, we see the pattern of Christian discipleship established from the beginning of John. One person encounters Jesus. Then they share their experience with the next person, who may express some reluctance. Then that person experiences Jesus on their own, directly, and becomes convinced about him, and then shares the news about Jesus with the next person. Andrew tells Peter. Philip tells Nathanael. The Samaritan woman tells the townspeople. "Come and See" is the common refrain.

The witnesses to the resurrected Jesus begins with Mary Magdalene. She encounters Jesus, shares the news. The others don't really buy it until they have their own experiences so that they can own their experience. They become convinced and then share it with Thomas. Like the other disciples, Thomas doesn't come to the fullest faith until he has his own experience. I say fullest faith, because he already has faith.

Then the story moves through the chain, and today we are the ones who are up next. Thomas makes his confession and, through this text, testifies to us. Now what will we do? Will we hang in there with some level of interest and commitment until we encounter Jesus in a way that moves us to the next level? What would the next level look like for us, understanding that we are all in very different places? For John's author, the highest level is living abundantly. Are we there yet?

This halting, slow, progression toward acceptance and trust is a big part of the human condition. When confronted with bad news about a job or a medical condition, we demand a second opinion. We need additional confirmation. On this day after Earth Day, the same thing is going on in our country about climate change. For some in our country, it isn't *if* we see the evidence, it is *until* we see the evidence (and the bar for that evidence has been 100% certainty)

because before that, we don't have to confront the changes that are required for us to save the planet from catastrophic weather changes and the resulting disruptions to the poorest populations of the world.

In the end, it's not Thomas' "doubting" or demanding that matters; it's his believing. Everybody doubts; not everyone believes. As Bishop Dyck said last week, that belief isn't a complete and absolute assurance but it is at least an openness to the mystery, inviting the possibility of hope. Sometimes that openness comes haltingly, sometimes we are doubtful, often it comes in a slow glacial-like movement that isn't even evident to us until long afterward. But eventually, we too are called to step out from the locked doors of our fear and to claim and proclaim that new life is possible. To build a new future for ourselves, our world, even our planet.

To do this is to *live abundantly*, may it be so. AMEN