



“Expanding Our Faith”

1 Peter 1:3-9 and John 20:19-31

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The Second Sunday of Easter

On a weekly basis...as David begins the process of thinking about his sermon for the coming Sunday...he has a straightforward approach to analyzing the relevant scripture reading. He asks two questions about the text: what is it trying to say...and what is it trying to do...or get us to do? Good advice...that I've incorporated into my process.

But, as we approach today's reading from the Gospel of John...the famous story we often call Doubting Thomas...we don't have to brood very long over the text...to answer those questions.

The evangelist...the author of the Gospel...he tells us exactly what he's up to. Nothing subliminal here...he puts it right on the table. He tells us that...this is "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."

The Gospel is telling us...in as straightforward a manner as possible...that this story...is about faith...about helping us build and fortify...expand...our faith.

This particular story appears in the Lectionary every year...always on this same Sunday...the Second Sunday of Easter...or what has become known as Low Sunday.

And I think it makes sense that we get to meet Doubting Thomas each and every year on this Sunday...it makes sense that we get to hear the Gospel's perspective on fortifying our faith...on this Sunday. In the wake of the euphoria of Easter...without the emotion to sustain us...inevitable questions start to appear. And so...it's possible that in this quieter time...we just may need some help with our faith.

Now...having faith...for many it's easier said than done. The central premise of the story of Doubting Thomas...is that faith...isn't so easy...for the simple reason...that we haven't had the luxury of being a witness...to the event that this story is about...the resurrection.

This story addresses the very real challenge of *believing without seeing*...which has been the challenge for every Christian...except for a very small number...for almost 2,000 years.

And so, the Gospel of John is trying to help us with our faith. When we boil this story down...that's what it's doing...providing counsel or guidance...giving us advice...on how to expand our faith.

Before we get to that advice...let's do a refresh on the story.

It opens with the disciples hiding behind locked doors....afraid of the authorities...perhaps afraid that they were next. They had apparently either not understood...or not believed...what Christ had been trying to tell them. And then Christ comes to them...and

makes all well again. Christ reveals his scars...and they rejoice. He has done what he promised. It's a miracle.

And with their confidence and loyalty renewed...Jesus sends them out as Apostles. They were witnesses...sent to testify to the people. Christ sends them out to spread the good news...to help the people find their faith.

Well...as it turns out...their first assignment didn't go very well. They couldn't even convince their buddy Thomas of what they had seen. Their opening chance to spread the good news....telling Thomas "We have seen the Lord..."...apparently that pitch didn't work.

Poor old Thomas...stubborn old Thomas...he hadn't yet been given the chance to inspect Christ...and so he refuses to trust the witness of his friends. He defiantly...bluntly...and maybe even annoyingly...holds out...saying unless he sees for himself...he will not believe.

But a week later...Christ returns to be with Thomas and the others...and this time he gives Thomas exactly what he asked for. Christ again reveals his scars...just as he had to the others.

And Thomas is so moved...that he immediately confesses...saying among the most moving of words in all of the Bible..."My Lord and my God." He too is apparently ready to step forward into his role as Apostle.

But Jesus isn't naïve. He understands perfectly well the irony of the situation. He sees that Thomas...and the others too...that they weren't really believing. What they had was knowledge...based on hard evidence...not faith.

And while their knowledge was life-changing...enabling them to move out into the world as Apostles...knowledge isn't the same thing as faith.

And so Christ puts words to this irony...he utters words that have defined the beautiful challenge for all Christians since these earliest days. And he does so by blessing...not Thomas and his friends...but instead...he blesses the rest of us...the rest of us who have to grapple with our faith in the absence of evidence.

He says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Yes...Christ knows that faith isn't easy.

Leadership 101—the basics of leadership—holds that it's always important to acknowledge...to show understanding of...or empathy for...the difficulty of the work facing a team. That's just good leadership.

But what Christ does here far transcends leadership...far transcends acknowledgement...or empathy. He blesses the task at hand. And so...yes...the work of faith...it is a blessed endeavor. And that's a good place to start if we are looking to build our faith. We should feel blessed in our endeavor.

While this wonderful story is rich with nuance and detail...I actually think the Gospel writer's perspective on faith...his advice...with regard to our faith...I think that it can be distilled down to three ideas.

The first may seem somewhat obvious. It concerns doubt...which is the centerpiece of the story.

And the point is simply...that we should not run from our doubt. This story shows Jesus as being starkly realistic...willing to confront something that many of us...who so deeply value our faith...might prefer to avoid thinking about.

But the message is clear. Doubt is real. It cannot be ignored.

Now it's true...Christ does instruct Thomas not to doubt...but only after Thomas has had the chance to inspect Christ. How could he doubt after that?

As for the rest of us...Christ simply blesses us...because we don't have the luxury that Thomas and the others had. He blesses us...for having to try to believe without seeing...with doubt as our inevitable companion.

In this way, I almost think that Christ is blessing doubt itself...lifting up doubt as very much a part of faith. St. Augustine puts it this way: "Doubt is but another element of faith."

And it's us...not Christ...not the Gospel...we are the ones who mockingly call him Doubting Thomas. That's not Christ's perspective. Christ instead...takes Thomas' doubt...and the doubt of the others...very seriously.

And so John's first point seems to simply be...that we need to accept some degree of doubt as part of our faith. We need not panic...when we question aspects of our faith.

As I said in my Good Friday reflection...Christ himself...felt free to question God...in ways that sound like he's questioning his faith.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, he challenged God saying, "Father, remove this cup from me...not what I want...but what you want." And then on the cross...he agonizingly asks, "My God...why have you forsaken me?"

And...as I also said at our Good Friday service...the Psalms are a remarkable mix of doubt-laden complaint...sitting alongside pleading and praise...often literally side by side.

And so maybe the message in this first point...is also that...we need to be easy on ourselves. Allow room for our doubt. It's part of who we are.

And now...about that second point...this second bit of advice about our faith...it's more subtly embedded in the story. But when we look at it...it too, I think, becomes clear.

It's about a concept that we lift up so frequently here at Plymouth...a concept that in many ways defines the way we think about Plymouth...as a wonderful community.

Yes...in a subtle way...this story harps on the importance of community. It does so in the very fact that Thomas was not willing...to trust his friends. The point is that to believe without seeing...some degree of trust is needed.

And taking this a bit further...if we are to believe without seeing...we have to trust...our brothers and sisters...of yesterday...and today...be willing to be open to their witness...in its many forms.

I think one of the reasons Thomas can seem annoying...is that he so brazenly refuses to give even the slightest bit of credence...to people who he undoubtedly loved.

He's been through remarkably trying times with them...they were his community...they were truly brothers and sisters. How could he be so dismissive?

And so maybe this second point...similar to the first point...is also...that in assessing our faith...we need to go easy on ourselves...we can't figure this all out alone in an ivory tower...we need to rely on our friends...rely on each other...including those to right of us...and to the left...and in front and back of us.

These first two points are about our role...first as individuals...and then as a community...in building our faith.

As individuals...we are allowed to doubt...in fact, we need to acknowledge our own individual doubt. And at the same time, we need our brothers and sisters...we need their witness too...we need each other.

But there's a third point here...a third bit of advice for our faith...and it's not about Thomas...or his friends...or even us. It's about the work that...only God...can do for us. We can't do this without God.

When the disciples were locked away in fear...Christ sought them out...not by making them unlock the door...not by making them demonstrate some kind of courage....not by making them display some degree of confidence in Christ...but instead...**Christ sought them out...flaws and all...precisely where they were.**

When Thomas refused to trust his friends...refused to even consider the idea of belief without seeing...Christ sought him out...in the very place of his doubt...in the very place of his anti-communal behavior. **Christ sought him out...flaws and all...exactly where he was.**

And so the beauty of this third point is that Christ allows for our uniqueness as individuals...allows us to be quirky...allows for us to come to faith at our own pace. And so maybe the best way to summarize this third point...is that Christ comes to us...wherever we may be...on our journey.

Serene Jones...the President of Union Theological Seminary...who preached here at Yvette's ordination just a few months ago....she puts it this way:

What remains a constant in the midst of all these questions...is the answer to the doubt that we find in John's story...an answer that concerns who *Jesus* is, not who *Thomas* is. It is here...that we find the real point of the Gospel narrative—a tale about God's coming to us...wherever we might be...It is Jesus who is determined to reach this stalwart skeptic...

We are all on such profound journeys...at our own special places...a wonderful spectrum. And the point is that Christ values all of those places. Christ is ready to meet each and every one of us...wherever we may be.

This is not the depiction of a "litmus test" God. No...ours is a powerfully welcoming God.

Earlier in the Gospel of John, Christ speaks of God's dwelling place...with its many rooms...a place where Christ himself is going...to prepare rooms for us. Wherever you are...wherever you are headed...God meets you there.

I recently had the privilege of witnessing the beauty of this spectrum with my own eyes...as we gathered on Monday nights...for our Lenten Bible study.

We read together the great stories of Genesis...Adam and Eve...Cain and Abel...and Noah. And, I think...because we all know these stories so well...because they are so embedded in who we are...we all tend to have very strong views about them...which made for robust discussion.

And that discussion revealed so many different perspectives...perspectives grounded in our personal experiences and proclivities...and in our different faith backgrounds.

Looking at these stories together...especially with the spectrum of faith backgrounds here at Plymouth...brought out so much...for me...and I hope for others.

I heard ideas that had never occurred to me before...and I've studied these stories very closely. And yet it never ceases to amaze me how different perspectives and new ideas come up...ideas that deepen my understanding of stories...stories that I thought I knew so well.

And this reminded me yet again...of the power of Scripture...the power of Scripture to surprise...by reaching us in our various places...in various ways.

At the beginning of the class...we went around the table...and everyone explained what they hoped to get out of the Bible study. The most common answer was...the hope to expand faith.

And the funny thing about that Bible study...is that what I experienced there...it reminds me so much of what we hear from the Gospel of John today.

What I heard...and felt...in that room...on four consecutive Lenten Mondays...
in the questions...and yes even expressions of doubt...
in the sense of community...
in the way everyone listened so closely to each other...
and in the wonderful spectrum of ideas and perspectives...

Yes, what I witnessed in that room...it showed me how to expand my faith...it helped me expand my faith...and reminded me...that Christ himself...blesses this endeavor... wherever we might be.

Let us hear Christ's words...addressed to each and every one of us...one more time:
"Blessed are those who have not seen...and yet have come to believe." We are most blessed indeed.

Amen.

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