

Sermon for 4-8-18; Easter 2B
Gospel - John 20:19-31
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Right at the outset, I want to acknowledge a troubling phrase from the first verse in today's Gospel reading: "for fear of the Jews." The Gospel writer tells us that when Jesus appears to his friends, "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews..."

I love John's Gospel for its mysticism, its layers of symbolism, and its identification of Jesus as the *Logos*, the eternal and transforming Word... and yet I know that John's Gospel, far more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, has fueled the fires of anti-Semitism for centuries. So-called Christians who seek an excuse to persecute our Jewish brothers and sisters often point to John's description of "the Jews" as selfish, scheming, violent brutes who delight in the gory spectacle of the crucifixion and harass Christ's followers.

The language of the other three Gospels makes it clear that it wasn't all, or even most, of the Jews who conspired to have Jesus killed -- it was a select group of men in authority, who felt threatened by Christ's growing influence and wanted to stamp out the Jesus movement. Because John used more general language to describe the conspirators, our English translations make it sound as if all the Jewish people in Jerusalem were enemies of Christ, but we know it wasn't so. And what we also know, and the anti-Semites conveniently forget, is that Jesus and his parents and his disciples and his traveling companions were Jews themselves.

Because it is the year 2018, and because we are not troglodytes but real Christians, we know that anti-Semitic interpretations of John's Gospel are antithetical to God's truth and a betrayal of our shared tradition. But knowing that is not enough; we are also called to acknowledge and repudiate anti-Jewish sentiments whenever we hear them. This is God's work, and this we will do.

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Now, let's consider the man who's the focus of this story -- aside from the risen Christ, that is. Poor Thomas. The past two millennia of Christian history have not been kind to him. We call him Doubting Thomas, and we use him as a cautionary tale, an example of someone who insists on questioning things that are obvious to everyone else. But is it fair, what we've done to Thomas, the way we've treated him?

Thomas was not there with his fellow disciples when Jesus appeared to them on the evening of the resurrection. His brothers were there; they saw Christ's hands and his side, they heard his voice, they felt his breath on their faces. But Thomas didn't get to see or hear or feel Jesus that night, and when his brothers tell him what he missed, he's incredulous. "We have seen the Lord," they tell him, and Thomas doesn't buy it.

"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" (vs 25).

Yes, Thomas doubts what the other disciples have told him, but wouldn't we do the same? His doubt is normal and healthy and understandable. According to the laws of nature and the history of the world and the reality of life and death as he knew it, what the other disciples told Thomas was impossible. And we don't believe impossible things.

Pigs can't fly, and trees can't talk, and dead people can't walk and talk and breathe. We don't believe these sorts of fantasies, even if they're reported to us by people we know and love. We smile and nod politely and think, "What on earth has gotten into them?" but we don't believe, not right away, not without proof.

So yes, Thomas is doubting, but he gets to see Jesus for himself a week later, when he and the other disciples are still hiding away in that room and the risen Lord appears. Jesus is pretty understanding about the whole thing: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in

my side. Do not doubt but believe" (vs. 27). It's exactly the proof that Thomas needed! Now he can believe.

The last two verses of our reading are the author's concluding note: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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."

"... [T]hrough believing you may have life in his name."

The evangelist wants us to believe, just like Mary and Thomas and all the others believed. If we believe, we'll have life in Christ's name. Sounds simple enough, right?

Actually, in the universe of John's Gospel, *believing* has multiple layers of meaning. Are you surprised? The Greek verb is *pisteuo*, the same verb used in that most famous verse, John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life").

The late theologian and New Testament scholar Marcus Borg preached and wrote extensively about the different meanings of *pisteuo* in John's Gospel. Believing, according to Borg, is the central component of faith, and it has three distinct yet interrelated meanings:

- to believe is to hold an intellectual position, to agree that a particular claim or statement is true (this is the definition of faith that has become dominant in Christianity over the last few centuries);
- to believe is to be loyal and committed to someone or something, being deliberately attentive and devoted to your relationship with that person or thing;
- and
- to believe is to trust in someone or something radically, to have confidence in that person or thing in such a way that you are freed from anxiety.ⁱ

These three meanings combined -- intellectual agreement, loyalty and dedication, and radical trust -- make up the belief that John says will give us life in Christ's name. These are the things Jesus asks of us: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (vs. 29).

Believing, then, is not a question of simply making up one's mind that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Messiah; it's not only an intellectual activity. Believing involves the whole of our being. Believing means living dedicated lives that are focused on Christ and trusting him with our choices and our resources. Believing is not an internal or private activity; if we believe as Jesus asks us to believe, it shows. It shows in our words and our actions and our lifestyles.

Can this multifaceted concept of belief help us understand Thomas's reaction when his friends tell him they have seen the Lord? The other disciples have encountered the risen Jesus in the flesh, but they're still hiding away in that room; they're still controlled by their fear and neglecting their call. Jesus sent them out to do God's work, but they haven't gone anywhere. They may believe in the resurrection intellectually, but they sure aren't acting like it.

And what about us? Are we acting like it? If we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ up here (**point to my head**), does it show in our lives? Are we loyal, and dedicated, and radically trusting?

A clergy friend from another denomination shared a sad story with me this week. Her church decided to hold a Friday night spaghetti supper fellowship event. It wasn't a fundraiser for any specific ministry or project, but rather a way to build relationships within and outside the congregation. The dinner cost \$4 per person, for a nice meal of spaghetti, salad, garlic bread, and a drink. They advertised this event far and wide, hoping to bring in some folks that weren't regulars at the church but might be seeking fellowship and a home-cooked meal.

After the meal, my friend was dismayed to learn that the two church members who were tasked with collecting cash at the door had turned away

three teenagers from the neighborhood who had arrived near the end of the supper. The teens said they were hungry, and just wanted some spaghetti, but they didn't have \$12. The church folks turned them away.

My friend, the pastor, was heartbroken. "Twelve dollars? Refusing to feed hungry people over twelve dollars? Are we really that selfish, and fearful, and uncaring? Would Jesus turn people away over twelve dollars? ...How can we call ourselves followers of Christ when we do the very opposite of what he asks us to do?"

Those two church members aren't horrible people, of course; but they made the wrong choice in that moment. Even the best among us fail in our call at times. We're not perfect; neither were the disciples. But we do have a responsibility to strive always towards the goal set out for us by our Lord: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus calls us to believe, not only with our minds but also with our hearts and souls and voices, to believe with all of our being. Jesus calls us to believe so fully and deeply and honestly that our belief is manifested in every aspect of our lives.

In this Easter season and beyond, let us honor Jesus by giving him what he asks of us. Let us believe in him, and let's make it show. Amen.

ⁱ from Borg's sermon "What is Faith?" delivered at Calvary Episcopal Church (Memphis) on 3/16/2001, available at <http://www.explorefaith.org/LentenHomily03.16.01.html>