

Now What?

John 20:19-21

Reverend Rick Lemberg, was pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Arizona who described himself as "a Presbyterian by earthquake." He explained that his grandmother was a Baptist when the family moved from Iowa to California many years ago. A Presbyterian pastor visited her and invited her to come to the Presbyterian Church.

"I'm a Baptist," his grandmother said, "and it will take an act of God to get me to change." While they were chatting, an earthquake shook the home. Being from Iowa, she wasn't sure what it was, but when it was over, she told the pastor, "I'll join."

Lemberg said he had no statistics on how many Baptists became Presbyterians after an earthquake, or vice versa.

I wish faith were that easy, don't you? I wish God would give each of us some unmistakable sign, perhaps not an earthquake, but some less frightening indication of God's interest in our affairs. I believe it was Woody Allen who said that a million dollars deposited in a Swiss bank account would be a nice gesture. Nothing too dramatic. Well, that is not exactly true, is it? Actually, it would have to be awfully dramatic. We are pretty good at explaining away even the most stirring of miracles. Faith is not easy. I don't think God ever meant for it to be. It is part of the struggle we go through as human beings.

What a couple of weeks it had been for the disciples. Everything happened so fast, too fast. One moment the crowds were welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem. A couple of days later he was arrested. The next day he died on the cross. The disciples were so shell-shocked they did not know what to do next. They were afraid and kept a low profile. They were living in fear because they thought what had happened to Jesus might very well happen to them. And then early that Sunday morning one of the women found the stone rolled away from the tomb. He is alive! Peter and one of the other disciples went racing to the tomb. Jesus' body was not there. Even more dramatically, Mary reported that she had seen and spoken to the risen Christ. That evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors not knowing what would happen next. In the midst of their confusion Jesus came and stood among them.

He said to his disciples, *Peace be with you*. At first, they were afraid. But when he showed them his hands and his side they rejoiced. Jesus was alive! Mary had told them the truth. They could see him with their own eyes. This was the most wonderful news imaginable. Then Jesus gave them a commission. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The disciples were to become messengers, responsible for carrying the good news of salvation to the far corners of the world.

The disciples were to continue the ministry of Jesus, they were to become his voice, his hands, his legs.

Then Jesus breathed on them and said to them, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. This is significant. The author of the gospel suggests to his readers that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples in the same way God breathed life into Adam, the first human.

For John, the writer of this 4th Gospel, the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost all merge into one great single event.

Do you see the urgency and the irony of the moment? From fear filled followers to fearless missionaries. It is just amazing what Jesus can do. But there is a little more to the story.

First, a little story. A little boy, growing up in the Midwest in a community where his father served as a minister was outside playing. He was doing all of the things that a little boy does. He was climbing trees. He was swinging on the swing set and jumping out. He was rolling on the ground, playing with his dog. Then his mother called him for dinner and all of the family gathered at the table. His mother looked at him and said, "Young man, let me see your hands."

There was some rubbing of his hands on his blue jeans before he held his hands up. His mother looked at them and asked, "How many times do I have to tell you that you must wash your hands before you eat? When your hands are dirty, they have germs all over them and you could get sick. After we say the blessing, I want you to march back to the bathroom and wash your hands."

Everyone at the table bowed their heads and the father said the blessing. Then, the little boy got up and headed out of the kitchen. He was heard to mutter on his way to the bathroom, "Germs and Jesus! Germs and Jesus!" That's all I ever hear around here and I haven't seen either one of them yet."

Thomas, one of the Twelve was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, *We have seen the Lord!* "It's true!" the disciples said, "It is really true!"

But Thomas wouldn't have any of it. He must have thought they were hallucinating, that their fear had driven them to see what they wanted to see. Thomas replied: *I can't believe what you're saying. Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, I will not believe.*

Thomas was a realist. He had been hurt and disappointed. He had expected so much from Jesus. Then, to watch him die on the cross like a common thief was too much for Thomas to bear. He had his hopes dashed once. Now he wanted to be careful because he didn't want to set himself up for another letdown. He just could not believe without seeing and touching Jesus for himself.

Most of the disciples had been trapped in fear. Now Thomas was ensnared in doubt. He had sought loneliness rather than togetherness. Because he wasn't with the others, he missed the first appearance of the Risen Christ.

When sorrow comes and sadness surrounds us, we often shut ourselves up and refuse to be with people. This is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we most need the fellowship of Christ's people; for it is there that we are most likely to meet him face to face.

Now a week had gone by and the disciples were again in the house. This time Thomas was present. Just like on Easter, Christ came and stood among them and said, *Peace be with you.*

Then 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.* Thomas answered him, *My Lord and my God!* And Thomas' words became a hallmark for the early church. His words become our words as we encounter the risen Christ.

We all go through those times of doubt, don't we?

People have always struggled with their doubts. The early Christians had just as much trouble believing as we do. The apostles did not believe until they saw the risen Lord Jesus with their own eyes. They told Thomas but he didn't believe the news either. He had to see for himself.

Jesus said to him, *You believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not yet seen and yet have come to believe.*

John closes his Easter story by noting that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which he didn't write down in his Gospel. 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 eternal life in his name.*

The story of Easter morning in John is the story of the empty tomb, and Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Lord. That story is in the same chapter of John's Gospel as today's lesson. I think it's important to realize that when we put it all together we become aware that there are many ways that people recognize Jesus, and all are valid. Remember, the beloved disciple merely saw the empty tomb. That was enough for him, and he believed. Mary believes when she hears the Lord call her by name.

In this section, first the disciples believe when they see the risen Christ. Then, finally, Thomas says he has to handle the wounds to believe. Fred Craddock concludes, "Faith is not for all the same experience, neither is it generated with the same kind and degree of evidence." To the disciples, Jesus appears in a locked room, demonstrating he can make himself present when and where he chooses. His first word is familiar, *Peace*. We recognize it from his conversation promising the Holy Spirit, when he leaves his disciples in peace. (14:27) He breathes on them the Holy Spirit and gives them authority to forgive or retain sin.

The good news is that the encounter is not so much about the doubt of Thomas as it is about the grace of Jesus. He reminds me here of one of the characters in one of his own parables. You know the familiar story of the so-called "Prodigal Son." The younger son takes his inheritance and goes away, foolishly spending his money on extravagant living. He is off in a far country, away from his family and his faith, almost starving to death, until he comes to his senses. He decides to go home and beg his father's forgiveness, then offer to work as a laborer on his father's farm. At least there he knows he will be safe and will have enough to eat. But before he can even get home, his father runs out to meet him, he greets him with love, and yes, even with a party.

Mary couldn't believe until she heard his voice call her name, and so he spoke to her. The disciples, huddled in the closed room had heard Mary's testimony. But they couldn't believe until they saw him. So he appeared to them. But for Thomas, even seeing wouldn't be enough. So Jesus comes out to meet him, out into the breach between doubt and faith. He said, *Thomas, go ahead and put your finger here. Don't doubt, but believe!* And then Thomas knew the truth: *My Lord and my God!*

It's easy to believe on Easter morning, surrounded by crowds of the faithful, with the strains of stirring music our hearts. But life isn't always lived on Easter morning. Sometimes we experience our own versions of Good Friday. All sorts of circumstances can lead us to doubt our faith: a lost job; a critical illness; betrayal by someone we trusted; the death of a loved one; a disaster in which we see thousands of innocent people suffer.

But Jesus comes out to meet us in the breach between doubt and faith. We can trust Jesus will meet us in prayer -even when we don't know what or how to pray - Bible study, Christian fellowship, worship, and in the many wonderful and ordinary moments in life when we are open to the Holy Spirit.

That is when we recognize Jesus for who he is. He is the One who stands in the breach between life and death; between brokenness and wholeness; between sin and salvation; between hopelessness and joy; between doubt and faith.

Jesus comes to us, bringing us peace, and offering the same invitation he offered to Thomas, *Don't doubt, but believe.* That's cause for celebration, indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Rev. John W. Caster
Trinity Presbyterian Church
April 23, 2017