

Easter 2A
John 20:19-31
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Certainty or Faith?

Some of our high school youth have been preparing for confirmation this year. One of the topics we cover, in preparation for making a mature decision about faith, is doubt. I take the time to assure that everyone has doubts at some point. It's natural to wonder and have questions, especially when we hit life's rough spots. And I share my own personal opinion, that if anyone tells you they have never had doubts about their belief in God, they're either not being completely honest or they have not yet thought hard about their faith. Doubt — particularly when we face foundation-shaking life experiences, both as individuals and in community — is part of our lives. Part of this life involves experiencing the pain of emptiness and discomfort, and these times can leave us feeling emotionally and spiritually adrift. And that's what we see today, in John's Gospel.

Easter morning has happened. Mary and the women have seen the empty tomb. They've told the disciples what they've seen and heard. Jesus is Risen! But the disciples are still hiding behind locked doors in fear, unable to move forward until Jesus comes and stands among them, offering his peace.

But Thomas wasn't there and he can't wrap his head around what he's been told. I imagine that the harder everyone tries to convince him of what has happened, repeating over and over that they really have seen Jesus, the more Thomas reacts, with even more heat and frustration. "I hear you! But I need to see Jesus with my own eyes. I have to touch those nail holes with my own finger. Better yet, where the sword cut him, I'd want to stick my whole hand in his side! Then, and only then, can I believe!"

Thomas, like all Jesus' followers, has had his faith shaken by Jesus' death. He too wants a sign! He wants to see what the others have seen, wants to have something solid to hang on to, something more than the words of his brothers and sisters.

I imagine Thomas craves certainty. It's so hard to live with *unknowing*, to be mired in this feeling of unsettledness and emptiness, unsure of how to continue.

But certainty is not faith. I'd argue that certainty is the opposite of faith. I'm defining certainty as fully knowing: having all the answers, all the facts; a state requiring no further inquiry, requiring no need, nor desire, nor willingness to dig deeper and discover more. Certainty is that comfortable place where we can maintain the status quo and feel rather complete. We're settled in with everything we need, thinking we know everything we need to know.

But if our desire is for certainty, we could be missing the truth: that faith is a mystery. Faith is about the *unknown* and *unknowable*. Faith is about trusting in God's endlessly deep love for us, trusting that God is always with us, even in those dark times when we don't understand the *why*, or can't see a way forward.

A week later, Jesus appears once again to the disciples. Thomas is there and Jesus offers himself completely to Thomas. “Thomas, look at me. See my wounds. Touch me. You don’t need to doubt. You can continue to believe.”

Jesus has come back for Thomas. Just as when Jesus once told the disciples the parable of the lost sheep, when the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to find the one lost, Jesus returns to that closed room to find Thomas. Jesus shows us once more just how precious each one of God’s beloved children truly is: as an individual, and as part of the body of his believers, the church. Jesus lovingly encounters each one of us right where we are.

It’s not Thomas’s doubting or demanding that matters; it’s his believing. And as Thomas sees Jesus, he recognizes him without even touching him, saying “My Lord and my God!” Jesus continues to reach out in love — for Thomas, for the disciples, for each of us — gently guiding us towards a resurrection life. A life that, with God’s help, can have peace, purpose, and power through faith.

When Jesus appears to Thomas and the disciples, he brings his peace. This peace is not only a greeting but a gift; a gift that enables us to carry out the Lord’s mission in the world. A true peace that overcomes fear and doubt, while we live out our lives in Christ while facing our own life journey’s challenges, problems, and joys.

Jesus also brings purpose. The Lord gathered the disciples — and continues to gather us — to be witnesses for Him, to spread the good news of God’s gift of grace, and the hope of salvation in Christ. Just as Jesus was sent by the Almighty to save the world, so too are we sent to share God’s message of salvation by word and deed.

And Jesus brings us the power of the Spirit. We are not left alone, dependent on our own abilities or strengths, to accomplish God’s work, for Jesus provides his strength as he breathes on us, giving us the power of the Spirit. And through the Spirit, we too, like Thomas and the disciples, are empowered to fulfill God’s call to carry Christ’s light into the world.

We are all called to carry Christ’s resurrection light into the world, to share God’s message of reconciliation and hope, by sharing the good news of the great love that God has for all God’s beloved children. We bring our Lord’s healing love and forgiveness into the world, as we bear witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury shared these thoughts on the resurrection:

There is no hope of understanding the Resurrection outside the process of renewing humanity in forgiveness . . . the empty tomb proves nothing. . . no amount of apparitions, however well authenticated, would mean anything either, apart from the testimony of forgiven lives communicating forgiveness.

The resurrection *is* an experience of forgiveness: for those who had abandoned Jesus; for those in power and authority who executed him; for those who looked away, uncaring and unconcerned, doing nothing; and for those who doubt and despair and question. Jesus displays his forgiveness by revealing himself through the resurrection, and then sending us out to do his ongoing work of revelation, love, and reconciliation. We bring forgiveness to others through

revealing God's love, by loving our neighbors as Christ loves us, by welcoming and inviting others to join with us in developing relationships with the Living God. We bring forgiveness by answering Jesus call to go out into the world, just as Jesus was sent by God into the world.

Are we allowing ourselves to truly believe: to accept God's peace, so we can live into God's purpose, through the power of the Spirit? Does our faith embolden us to take the risk of trying something new, even if we still carry some doubt about whether we're the right person, or if it's the right time? Or are we stuck running in place, holding out for certainty, before we make a move forward? Is God's own breath, the Spirit, nudging us to take action in the world and step out in faith?

Easter is the beginning of our mission as the church. The Risen Jesus reveals himself through the empty tomb, breathes new life in us through the gift of Spirit, and strengthens us as his disciples to go out into the world through those doors, to be his hands and feet, sharing God's love in the world. Now is the time, in our own time, in what can be a confusing and pain-filled world, to go forth and be the church. Amen.