

John 20: 19-29 “Doubting in Faith” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/12/26

Last Sunday was Easter, where we honored the resurrection of Christ, and in a world where death is inevitable, that is no small thing to celebrate for sure. After one such celebration, a pastor was shaking hands with people as they left church. A couple greeted her and said, “We listened carefully to every word you said.” The pastor thanked the couple and said she hoped to see them again next week. “Oh,” the couple responded, “We won’t be here next week. We’re going to try another church to get a second opinion.” Not everyone embraces the celebration, let alone the mystery. In the Gospel of John, who is the one to linger on and on about what it was like to be a post-Easter disciple, we realize someone forgot to send a memo about the celebration to those first disciples. Instead of celebrating, they are cowering.

On the day the women went to the tomb to tend to Jesus’ body, they discovered, much to their astonishment and amazement, that his body was not there and, in fact, he was no longer dead at all. Cut to the men, who were sequestered and hiding behind locked doors, they are scared for the very lives. And they had reason to be, for after the events of the past few days, the entire city was up in arms. Rev. Amy Butler reminds us that the temple leadership had done everything in its power to get rid of Jesus, stirring up the crowds and orchestrating a PR campaign for the record books. Still, so much division arose that the Roman government had to get involved and Pontius Pilate placed guards at the sealed tomb to make sure the rebellion was squelched, once and for all. If the men had been recognized as followers of Jesus, not only were they in danger from the temple rulers, now the Roman occupation leaders were involved as well. And if the women were right... if somehow the stone had been rolled away and Jesus’ body was missing... then they surely would be suspects for stealing the body just to continue the rebellion. Behind locked doors, they huddle on Easter night when Christ appears and says “Peace be with you,” which is another way of saying “Be whole, be well.” Greeting them at the source of their biggest fear, Christ offers them comfort, courage, and the breath of the Holy Spirit, sort of like an assurance that they will be ok no matter what happens. It is a commissioning to his

followers to go speak truth to the world, to teach and offer forgiveness as an integral path towards being whole and well. They now are the ones to model what they have been taught. But someone is missing in the room – Thomas isn't present. No one knows why – maybe he stepped out to watch the stars, maybe he went for coffee or a grocery run. For his absence and subsequent response, he gets the nickname “Doubting Thomas,” which I think is all kinds of wrong. After all, I can't imagine any of the other apostles in the same situation acting any differently. In fact, in the Gospel of Luke, they all doubted the women who proclaimed, “The Lord has risen,” telling them to stop their idle chatter. The problem is Thomas gets labelled for it. You can almost hear Thomas saying, “Hey, we don't call Peter ‘Denying Peter’ or James ‘*Idle Chatter Accuser*’. So what is up with two millennia of history books, cartoons, sermons and dissertations on ‘Doubting Thomas’?” If you think about it, Thomas made a reasonable statement in an unreasonable, once-in-a-lifetime resurrection situation. What is interesting is how comfortable we are in letting Thomas be so trapped. Maybe we need his doubt to make sense of our own? However, the struggle becomes complicated when we make the focus of the story about “*Doubting Thomas*,” which thus excuses our disbelief and desire for a second opinion.

Yet a closer look at Thomas and we might come to a different conclusion, not just about the person, but about doubt, faith, and belief overall. Believing is a huge deal in John's Gospel. Mark uses the verb 13 times, Matthew uses it 9 times, and Luke 7. John uses it over *90 times* in his Gospel. He is writing to a later audience who never witnessed Jesus in person, only heard stories. They are the next generation of followers whose belief has to come through trust, not physical proof. For John's Gospel, to believe is to trust what God has done in Christ, and to act as if it were true. To believe is to wash one another's feet. To believe is to abide in love. To believe is to lay down one's life for one's friends. In John's Gospel, Jesus isn't as interested in what we think or feel, but in how we act. In our own day, Barbara Brown Taylor notes that believing has lost most of its motion. The word has just sort of sat down and become an overweight noun that separates those who are “in” with God from those who are

“out.” Christian beliefs have replaced Christian believing, so that if you ask someone what it means to believe in Jesus, what you get is a list of propositions, rules and regulations that a person must accept to be true: “I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he died for our sins, that he was resurrected from the dead, that he will come again to judge the living and the dead.” Taylor cautions us that if we hold to these words *carte blanche*, we were possibly taught that being certain of such things will save you a whole world of trouble. All you have to do is accept the truths that have been handed down and stop asking questions about divine realities beyond your grasp. All you have to do is believe what you have been told, and you can go to sleep at night with an untroubled heart.

There’s nothing deeply wrong with that. It’s more or less how John concludes his Gospel saying, “these signs are written in this book 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.” But here is what is interesting: John’s Gospel is filled with doubters and his narrative wouldn’t be the same without them. Starting with Nicodemus who doubts one can be born again all the way to the end where Peter and the Beloved Disciple doubt Mary Magdalene that the tombstone had been removed, to Mary herself doubting any other possibility than someone stole Jesus’ body. Maybe John is teaching us there is something about doubt that goes hand in hand with belief, with sincere faith. For him, belief is never static. A person is always in the process of “believing,” that is, leaning into belief in a broken world. Easter faith is not about certainty, but about actively leaning into the practice of believing. Easter’s reality is connected to living anew in a broken creation. Thomas’ faith was anything but stagnant, being put into motion with his humble confession, “My Lord and My God.” He was not focused on belief in the right things as much as practicing love and a mature trust in God. Trying to manipulate today’s story into some sort of dogma, therefore, only discredits its mystery and authenticity. It is very possible that Thomas’ faith was stronger because of, not despite, his doubts and questions.

I love what Frederich Buechner says about doubt – he writes that “doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep it awake and moving.” Of course, the disciples had doubts – wouldn’t you? But doubting isn’t the opposite of faith, fear is the opposite of faith. In the resurrection stories, everything changes not when the disciples go from doubt to faith, but from fear to faith. All of them had to see for themselves and even after they did, you have to know they sat around in that room, rubbed their blood shot eyes and stared at each other. How could you be certain of anything after a week like that? What had been certain before was what could be seen: dead men stayed dead, bodies stayed put in tombs, Caesar held all the power, while love was powerless before soldiers with hammers and huge nails. Then Easter happened, and everything was up for grabs. Was that really Jesus? Did he really mean what he said about spreading the Gospel message in the world? Is this really more than just a political campaign? Does this mean Jesus really is (*gulp*) the Son of God? You know they were having a hard time with it all, because the first divine words spoken to them are “Peace be with you” and “Don’t be afraid”. If Thomas’ plea, “Unless I see... Unless I touch...I will not believe...” was a faithless statement, Jesus did not seem to mind. When Christ returns for an encore just for Thomas, he appears more concerned about fear than doubt. The truth is Jesus welcomed questions, he taught thru questions, and he didn’t shame Thomas, but rather gave him exactly what he wanted, which was more than he had given any of the others. In this week after Easter, the disciples have stepped beyond the safe certainties of belief to the sublime uncertainties of faith. This rarely comes without the presence of doubt as those relentless ants that keep the pants of faith active, awake and in motion. At the end, a statement is made which John feels is crucial for his readers, and for us 2000 years later. To those who can no longer see or physically touch him, the Risen Messiah says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Christ speaks with crazy confidence that what happened with Thomas could happen again and again, turning troubles into astonishment, turning fears into faith, and turning doubts into active believing in ^{this} week after, and all the weeks to come. May it be so.