



“Doubt”

John 20: 19-31

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Congratulations! You are here. You are here on what the church affectionately calls “low Sunday.” Why “low Sunday,” you ask? Look to your right and left. Because attendance is low! Last week’s Easter clothes have been worn, washed, and are perhaps still balled up in your dryer at home, waiting to be folded. The chocolate bunnies have been eaten—at least their ears. The college kids on break have returned to school and it is back to business as usual here in our church. My husband calls last week “Amateur Sunday”—as in, those who only show up in church once a year—the “amateurs”—make their one annual appearance on Easter. If it draws them into a deeper relationship with God, with the church, then Alleluia for Amateur Sunday. If they show up as a command performance and leave still unsure of how their Creator feels about them—well, that’s heartbreaking . . . but there’s always next Easter.

Where are the crowds from last Sunday? Why aren’t those “amateurs” in the pews on “low Sunday?” Dave hinted at the answer during the sermon last week. Remember the story of the man who asked Jesus to heal his son? Jesus said, “Go, your child will live” and the man believed him. Dave wondered how long that father would believe Jesus, and if the doubts had started to creep in even before he reached the city gate.

Doubt is a powerful, normal human emotion. It is easy to doubt that Christ died and was raised out of love for us. For some of us Easter worshippers—especially the amateurs who are not used to hearing the good news of God’s love—the doubts started to creep in by the time they reached the parking lot. For others of us, the doubts about deserving and receiving God’s love stayed away until later that evening when we snapped at our spouses or condemned ourselves for something we said earlier that day. A few of us were still high on resurrection until Wednesday, when we had a few too many drinks or our patience snapped and we yelled at our kids in frustration-- and then woke up with the familiar self-loathing Thursday morning. Because we are all human, I’m willing to bet that not a single one of us made it until today without

doubting that we are lovable—and loved by the triune God. We're human and we are wired for doubt.

Listen to today's scripture and imagine it is the year 100 and you are hearing this story for the very first time—not from an ancient text but from your friend. It has been 60 years since the resurrection so this story has already been passed down a generation. Earlier your friend told you about Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene alone, near the tomb, and she mistook him for a gardener until he spoke her name. Now here is another story, offered as further evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Listen to John 20: 19-31:

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews” The Jews. Let's pause for what Christian Educator Anna Brown used to call a “teachable moment.” It's about the phrase, “the Jews.” When Jesus was born, Rome was the enemy of the Jewish people. Jesus—a Jew—was born in an outdoor stall because of a combination of harsh tax law and census demands from the empire. When a group of people are persecuted, they band together to survive. In the 1st century the Jewish people did not have tremendous power in a Roman ruled world so they banded closely together and gathered around the synagogue where they worshipped, conducted business, and enjoyed fellowship. The synagogue was more than a worship center; it was a community center, and there the Jewish people felt more safe and secure. For years Jewish Christians, like the disciples, worshipped at the synagogue side by side with Jews who believed Jesus was a prophet but not the Messiah. A few years before the Gospel of John was written a power struggle led to a split in Jewish society. Those who claimed Christ as Messiah lost and were aposynogogia—kicked out of the synagogue. Kicked out of their community. Yes the people for whom the Gospel of John is written fear Rome . . . but they also deeply resent the Jewish community that has banished them. There is anxiety about survival and rejection. In the Gospel of John, the phrase “the Jews” does not refer to a race of people, but rather to anyone who threatens this banished group's pursuit of Christian life. Theologian Francis J. Moloney explains “the Jews” means anyone of any age and any nation who has decided, once and for all, that Jesus of Nazareth is not the Messiah. (Moloney, pp. 9-11)

Thus ends of the Anna Brown “teachable moment.” Let's return to the text. While I read it, imagine yourself hearing it for the first time from a friend.

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

27 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."

28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

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

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

31 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.

(John 20:19-31 NRS)

Give me a show of hands: is there anybody here who agrees with me that maybe Thomas got a bad rap? The guy just wants to see the body and know that all is well. The other disciples got to see the scars before they believed, so why not Thomas? Like the bungee jump video of my son Cam, when you love someone you want proof that they are okay. Otherwise, you have your doubts.

All of the disciples except Thomas are shut up in a room, afraid. Jesus appears, shows the disciples his hands and side, and THEN they believe. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them and sends them out to spread the good news. Scripture doesn't say what happens that following week with those believing disciples. *Did they rush out and spread the good news? Are they any better than Thomas?* It doesn't say so here! Here we only read what that they told Thomas. And Thomas says, "I want to see this for myself!"

Thomas doubts the resurrection until he can see proof. That is not a stretch for me. I hear stories all the time and think, "I'll believe it when I see it." In fact, I think we are doubters to the core. Maybe, just maybe we can believe the negative stories without proof. Did you hear about the mysterious virus going around? Did you know Windows 10 spies on you? Did you hear that all the recycling material and the garbage just gets dumped in the same hole? Believing bad things without proof is plausible. But believing good things without evidence? It goes against our cynical "grown up" nature. We pretend by not believing in the good news we can protect our hearts from being crushed by disappointment.

Doubting the resurrection is human. Like us today, the people in the year 100, just 60 years after Jesus' death, wanted proof. They heard the story of Mary, of the disciples, and finally of Thomas. This passage tells us plainly—it tries to convince us!-- that we are to believe without proof, that these stories are proof enough. Verse 31 is crystal clear: "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." The author of John does not mince words. *Look! All you doubters! Here is proof! I wrote it down!* And did you hear Jesus: "Do not doubt but believe. . . . Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The resurrection isn't just a miracle, it's a *double* miracle. Miracle one is the resurrection itself – Christ lives! And part two of the miracle is that we who are wired to doubt DO believe. Miracle two is that you and I are here again this Sunday—on low Sunday—to hear more, to worship, to ask questions, to eat the bread and drink from the cup, in spite of our doubts.

Resurrection is certainly miraculous . . . but it's not perfect. Even the resurrected Jesus had scars. Scars. Unlike the resurrection stories of Lazarus and the little girl, Jesus had hard evidence of his death still carved into his body. Our all-knowing God, who knows the number of hairs on our heads, recognizes we are wired for doubt. The Christ who understands our humanity so well knows we'll want to see the scars.

No, resurrection isn't perfect. Christ's resurrection doesn't make everything "all better." We are still flawed humans living in a sinful world and we have questions. Resurrection people aren't required to follow blindly. Shallow faith shuts questions down. It hides in a room "for fear of the Jews." A complex faith, a faith of depth, asks questions and makes room for doubt. A complex faith allows for different interpretations and multiple voices in the church. A complex faith doesn't claim to have all of the answers. A complex faith is not locked up in a room in fear but is Mary who walks in the garden alone. In the dark. Filled with doubt.

Who are we now, this “low Sunday” in Duluth? Are we anxious? Of course. Do we doubt? You bet we do. Are we tempted to huddle in the locked room “for fear of the Jews?” It was under that blame rhetoric that the Holocaust flourished. That rhetoric still exists today and is still dangerous. The Jews aren’t the only target. Read this week’s newspaper and ask yourself, “What groups are we demonizing in America today, in 2016, as we huddle in our room, filled with anxiety?”

Hear the good news! We are loved by a God who doesn’t expect us to know all of the answers. We are loved by a God who shows us the scars. Scars are part of that whole package of unconditional love. We are loved by a Messiah who said “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” because He knew it would take all of our faith, to believe we are deserving of His unconditional resurrectional love without seeing his scars. It makes me wonder: was Thomas doubting the resurrection of Christ or was he doubting that he, Disciple Thomas, could be loved by Jesus so much that Jesus would actually show up a week after Easter. For Thomas. On low Sunday.

As it turns out—yes. Yes Thomas mattered enough for Jesus to be there for him. And likewise for you and me. “Lord we are not worthy, but only say the word and we shall be healed.” Thank God for scars and doubt and a table that Christ has set for all of us, sinners and saints, to share in the sacrament of communion. At this table God says yes, you are worth it. Let’s eat, drink, and then leave this place vowing to make it past the parking lot with our belief. Amen.

Works Cited

Moloney, F. J. (1998). *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.