

Sermon: From Doubt to Trust

Series: Believe and Encounter

Scripture Reading: John 20:19-31

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From Doubt to Trust

So here we are, the Sunday after. The Sunday after our alleluias harmonized with triumphal brass. The Sunday after the lilies were so full on the chancel steps that it was tricky to navigate. A week has passed and the lilies have dispersed to our living rooms. The brass are resting up for another festive day. The children still fill the first pew but not to overflowing.

Happy Easter! On this second Sunday of Easter, Audrey Jellet blesses us with her beautiful cello. Seth, Sabrina, and the choir are here. We are here. We gather to receive the scriptures, to pray, and to sing alleluia: Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed.

This is Eastertide - 50 days from Easter to Pentecost. Fifty days for the earth-changing, life-altering news of a resurrected and living Lord to sink in. In our sermon series over the next few weeks, *Believe and Encounter*, we will explore six resurrection stories from the gospels. Six encounters with the risen Lord. While five of the stories are pulled from different parts of the three year lectionary cycle, today's reading from John is used all three years. The story of the risen Christ surprising his disciples in a locked room, followed by the story of 'doubting Thomas' is considered important enough that it is featured every year. I want us to think together about why that might be.

For starters, these stories from the 20th chapter in John are honest about the different ways the news of the resurrection is received. Tentatively, and then joyfully by a room full of traumatized disciples; skeptically by the one whose timing was off and missed this first encounter all together. These stories also mirror our own reception of the resurrection. We don't hesitate to celebrate on Easter. We put on our Sunday best, gather with family and friends, share our favorite foods, hunt brightly colored eggs, and maybe whack a pinata. It is afterwards, when the Easter grass is picked out the carpet and the table cloths are folded and put away, that the questions bubble up.

What difference does a risen Lord make in my life? What difference does it make for the world? What does it mean to believe? When we ask these questions, we're ready for Thomas.

Thomas gets a bad rap - a reputation for faithlessness that he doesn't deserve.

Remember when Jesus learned that his good friend Lazarus was ill? He tells the disciples that it is time to return to Judea. The disciples warn him against it, it is too dangerous. Thomas is the one who urges them on saying: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Doubting Thomas? He sounds like faithful Thomas. Bold Thomas. And yes, it is Thomas who questions his fellow disciples when they say to him, "We have seen the Lord." Why can't he just believe their witness? To be honest, what his friends are saying doesn't make sense. They have experienced so much disappointment and grief. Why compound the misery by trusting a fantastic claim about rising from the dead?

Our friend Thomas is a pragmatist. If it sounds too good to be true it isn't. Thomas wants proof: "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." Firm, rational Thoms is trying very hard to hold it together. Can you relate?

If you are familiar with the Meyer's Briggs Type Indicator, a personality test that sorts according to behavioral preferences - Thomas is a classic Myers Briggs "S". "S" for sensing. Thomas, along with approximately 75% of us, prefers to take in information through our senses, trusting what can be seen, heard, touched, observed. We favor facts over speculation. That leaves only a quarter of us who operate as Myers Briggs 'Ns' for intuition. N's seek patterns and possibilities in the world around us. Not to make too much of temperament sorting but it can be a helpful tool as we seek to understand ourselves and those around us.

It seems to me that Jesus understands Thomas. Jesus loves Thomas enough to meet him exactly where he is. Notice that Jesus doesn't offer Thomas a metaphysical explanation of where he has been and what has happened to his body. He doesn't appear to him in a dream that requires interpretation. Jesus offers Thomas the same proof he gave to the others just a week before. He appears, in the flesh, sharing his wounds, and in so doing, offers healing.

It is at this point that something remarkable happens. Jesus reaches out to Thomas in love. Thomas returns this love as faith. Whether or not Thomas traces the wound in Jesus' palm, whether or not he actually places his hand in Jesus' side, Thomas experiences a breakthrough - an insight that his sensing preference can't provide. Eyes wide open, falling on his knees, Thomas proclaims "My Lord and my God!" Notably, Thomas is the first in John's gospel to grasp the truth that we have been let in on since the very first chapter: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1: 1-4). In this moment of encounter, Thomas sees the Lord. Thomas moves from a posture of doubt to faith.

I found help for my own pondering this week in the reflections of Dr. Rene Such Schreiner of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Chicago. Dr. Schreiner explores the range of meanings of the verb that is at the heart of this morning's text: *pisteo*. *Pisteo* is typically

translated *believe*. Belief and believing are primary themes in today's reading. They are primary themes throughout John's gospel.

*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that everyone who **believes** in him... (3:16)*

*Those who **believe** in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and **believes** in me will never die. Do you **believe** this?"*

(Jesus with Martha when her brother Lazarus has died, 11:25-26)

*I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may **believe** that I am he.* (Jesus with his disciples in the upper room, 13:19)

This verb, *pisteo*, in addition to and alongside *belief* includes the concept of *trust*. The idea of placing one's trust in something or someone who is trustworthy.

Let's try it out:

*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that everyone who **trusts** in him shall not perish... (3:16)*

What do you think?

"The English verb 'believe'", Schreiner notes, "has a predominantly cognitive emphasis - our 'brain' either assents or not. Trust, on the other hand, is more relational and exists on a spectrum - often encompassing the feelings that influence our thoughts and actions. Hence, we often associate believing with our 'heads' and trusting with our 'hearts'.

I find it helpful to think of the things I believe - those things I affirm as a confessing Christian - as grounded in a relationship of trust.

I trust in God who created all that is, including me, and is creating still.

I trust in a living Lord who knows me intimately, wants what is best for me, and guides my path.

When I struggle, when life is hard, I do what I can to recenter myself in this grounding relationship. Through prayer, reflection, experience, by the grace of God, I am brought back to the one I trust, the one in whom I believe.

Thomas' doubt sets up the concluding challenge in today's post resurrection encounter: "Have you believed, Thomas, because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

For some of us, this is an uncomplicated proposition. We receive the scriptures, study the doctrine, listen to our teachers and are able to say without reservation that we believe. The confession we made many years ago rings true for us today, and only deepens as the years go by. As Jesus himself declares, this kind of faith is a great blessing. A blessed assurance.

For those of us whose sense of assurance waxes and wanes, for those who find the life of faith to be work requiring study, prayer, consultation and just plain getting through another day, we have our friend Thomas. Like Thomas, we can be honest with our questions. We can speak our doubt knowing that we are wonderfully made in the divine image and gifted with critical faculty. Thomas reminds us that doubt is not the opposite of faith. It is simply part of the journey.

My hope for each of us, this second Sunday of Easter, is that we be surrounded by those who remind us we are known and loved for exactly who we are. My prayer is that we trust the living Lord to meet us in our own places of fear, anxiety, and questioning.

With Thomas, let's imagine how it can be that we are intimately known and fiercely loved by one who pours out his very life for us. With Thomas, may we find our way, for the first time or the hundredth, to our own confession: My Lord and my God!

Alleluia! Amen.