

Second Sunday in Easter, April 8, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

"Believing for Real Life"

John 20: 19-31

INTRODUCTION

The choir has beautifully introduced us to the story of Thomas and his journey to faith. In some ways it is too bad that he has been given the label of "Doubting Thomas," because the end result of his struggle to believe was that he accepted that Jesus had been resurrected, and this conviction made *him* alive. Indeed, according to the oral tradition of the church, Thomas eventually went to India to share the Gospel.

On the other hand, it is good for us to have a "doubter" among those who were closest to Jesus, one with whom we can feel some solidarity in the ebb and flow of our own journeys of faith. The gospel of John is the last of the four gospels to be written, and it was put together during the generation when the original eyewitnesses were dying off. The author wanted to welcome new people into Life and to nurture faith in those like us who would need to believe the word of resurrection from others who had lived before them, whom they had not known.

THE READING

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 Jewish authorities, 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.' ²⁷Then 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.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus 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. ³¹But 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.

SERMON

Tax day is coming. Like you, I presume, we have been working on our returns in order to file on time. Steve does the lion's share of the preparation, but it's an anxious enterprise for me, wondering if we've put in the right figures, thought of every deduction, and how much we'll owe. If ever there were to be the slightest chance that we'd earn a refund, I could imagine myself uttering an ultimatum: "*Unless* I can see the transaction, or put my hand on the check, I will *not* believe!" I sound like Thomas!

Real life seeing and touching certainly helps us believe good news! From time to time on the news, for instance, when a missing child is retrieved, they show the reunion. After hugging their child, the parents often take her face in their hands and look intently in her eyes, as if to be sure that she's really real.

The gospels tell us that Jesus had different reunions on that resurrection Sunday, appearing to Mary Magdalene, the two anonymous followers on the Road to Emmaus, and then to the unnumbered group in the house. As Nancy Haynes preached at the Sunrise Service last Sunday, each one's experience of and process of coming to belief in the resurrection was unique. Not one sole method was laid out as normative for all.¹ Additionally, Jesus allowed these disciples to see and touch him after he had been raised from the dead, but Thomas was not present on these occasions.

Although they told him, "We have seen the Lord!" after the traumatic events of Holy Week, Thomas apparently was not ready to believe the good news. The way I imagine it, he was still in shock after the violence of the crucifixion, as preoccupied with the wounds as he was. That Jesus could be alive probably seemed too good to be true, and Thomas guarded himself against further heartache. So he put his foot down and ushered his Easter ultimatum:

¹Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 143.

“Unless I see and touch...I will *not* believe.” Then, on his own schedule, not on demand, but a week later, Jesus welcomed his common sense, questioning friend, and gave Thomas the opportunity to peer and prod – a blessing that led him to confess concerning Jesus’ identity: “My Lord, and my God!” (one of the earliest recorded confessions of Christian faith)

As great a blessing as this encounter was for Thomas, according to John, **Jesus was concerned as much or more for those who were coming later – even for you and me.** Remember how, earlier, he prayed around the Last Supper for those who would come to faith by word of the apostles.

A ministerial colleague of mine in the Northwest wrote about an amazing hike he took, during which he came upon a great eagle sitting on a branch just above him. He quietly reached for his camera, and the magnificent bird immediately took off. Art quickly snapped the photo and watched the eagle soar away. Once the pictures were developed, he eagerly looked for this shot, but there was no picture of it. Where the eagle should have been he saw only an empty blue sky with evergreen treetops. He reflected how this was like the story of the empty tomb. He had so wanted to show it to others, but now they would have to take him at his word.²

In his summary to this passage, John says that he has written this gospel **so that readers might believe the news of the living Christ and it would give them life.**

A few years ago, a visitor to my church asked for an appointment. He was a successful pathologist, and as such a scientific thinker. He had been raised in the church, his father a pastor. I had also learned that since young adulthood, Dave had been not only a skeptic about Christianity, but an argumentative agnostic. Who knows, maybe he had experienced just too high a dose of religion. So I was expecting questions about how as an intelligent person I could believe the good news of Jesus Christ, and I braced for an argument. I probably overdid it, because sitting down with him I tried to work into the friendly dialogue as many reasons as I could for believing and joining the church. He smiled and said, “Jean, I don’t need proof anymore. I believe and am ready to commit.” After the twists and turns of life experience, he had returned to the church and its testimony about real life, taking that leap of faith. He called it a blessing and became an exceptional leader in our church.

Scholar Marcus Borg outlines the etymology of the verb “to believe,” and points out that in Latin it literally means, “to give one’s heart to.”³ And as has been reiterated here before, the heart was understood as the organ of intellect *and* feeling. Believing the good news of Real Life, then, means to give your whole self to it.

²Art Morgan – his newsletter, *Morgan’s Moments*.

³Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 26.

Ironically, though, this kind of second-generation blessing won't come through the regular senses of sight and touch that Thomas enjoyed. It will come only as we give our hearts to the word of good news that others tell and show us.

Maybe you've heard of "yoga for real life," "education for real life," or "design for real life?" Well, I call this *believing* for real life. And it occurs not only at a single moment of conversion, but over and over again along the course of one's entire life – "a decision anew in every situation."⁴

In other words, believing for real life is a list of *beatitudes* that you and I can experience: Blessed are you who are raising children these days, accepting the challenge of modeling faith before them, and taking the risk that they may not confirm it in the short term. Happy are you when you trust your doctor's assessment that you're clear of cancer even when you can't see it and touch this as truth on your own. Blessed are you when you choose to see the love in your marriage even amid the trials. Happy are you when you volunteer on the word of someone else that tells you that it's worth it, and when you study for a degree even when you can't be assured of a job after, and when you believe the call from God that leads you into a new job. Blessed are you when, in the world as it is, *you* keep looking for the Promised Land, and the fulfillment of the Dream, and the lion dwelling peaceably with the lamb, because the biblical prophets have said it.

Blessed are we when in real life situations we do real life believing, for in so doing, we will find the living God and experience real life!

⁴Craddock, 144.