

April 3, 2016



"Christian Basics: What Can We Really Believe?"

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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."

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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

How beautiful to celebrate baptism in this joyful season of Eastertide, as it is called in the church. 50 days, from the Resurrection of Christ on Easter to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. 50 days to stay with the story of the Resurrected Christ, the story that is central to our faith, and ask ourselves: what does it mean? Is it real? What kind of difference does it make in my life?

During these 50 days, John's Gospel presents us with stories of the Resurrected Christ. John's purpose was to make the teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus accessible to those who had not seen or heard of Jesus before. Rather fitting for our time and context, too, don't you think? Fitting, too, for the parts of us that still wonder, if we're honest—is this for real? What do I really believe? In what can I trust? Where do I find real peace?

We've created a sermon series for these Sundays of Eastertide called: "Christian Basics" to explore some of these questions. Through the stories of the gospel, we will encounter the Risen Christ in life-transforming ways and discover the basic building blocks of the faith we profess and into which we baptize baby Ezra Joseph this day.

Today, Doubting Thomas, asks the question we all ask at times: what can we really believe?

Let's go back to that scene and reconstruct a bit where we start out. The verses we hear this morning from John's Gospel follow immediately on the passage of Easter Day; but because we hear them a week apart from each other, we might not see the immediate connection. After the women have found the stone rolled away from the tomb and discovered that the body is not there; after Peter finds the tomb empty; then, later that same evening, the disciples have gathered in a house and locked the doors from fear. It's like they've locked themselves back into their own tomb.

Jesus stands among them. The very one who was raised up is called back to the tomb to witness to his own resurrection. He says: "Peace be with you" and then shows them his hands and his side. They rejoice to see him and Jesus says again: "Peace be with you."

And that would be enough, wouldn't it? The Risen Lord is there among them. A tomb sealed with a huge stone, and now locked doors, cannot stop him. He speaks. In fact, he says exactly what they need to hear—"Peace be with you." He shows them his wounded hands and side. And their hearts and their minds begin to remember all that he had said to them. That would be enough, wouldn't it, for the evening of the first day of Easter?

But the gospel writer gives us so much more. He gives us Thomas. On the very first day here's this disciple who takes the words right out of our mouths: I can't believe this is really true. Sometimes we're too embarrassed to say it, or maybe even ashamed that we have these same doubts. We all need Thomas to say what may be hard for us to say.

We all move along a continuum of certainty and doubt, more or less, and differing at differing times in our lives. It's the way God made us to be as humans with minds and hearts.

This past week I spoke with a woman who has gone through some really hard times. In the course of our conversation, she said: "I guess you could call me a lapsed Methodist. I used to believe in God, but now, after everything I've experienced, I just don't any more. I don't think there's anything out there."

Painfully honest. So hurt. My prayer is that she will be able to hear the first words Jesus says on that first day of Easter: "Peace be with you." Words that, quite frankly, seem pretty crazy on the face of it, if we're honest. Words of a faith that doesn't make sense, and yet, is true, on a deeper level than our minds can sometimes grasp.

It's why we all need Thomas to be Thomas for us.

Remember just a couple days prior, when Jesus was talking with his disciples on that last night? Jesus was talking about no longer being with them, about dying. And he said to them that night: "Do not let your hearts be troubled....in my

Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Everyone was listening intently. Only one of the twelve dares speak. Who? Thomas. He calls Jesus on it. "Lord, we don't have a clue where you are going. How can we possibly know the way?" Jesus responds with those beautiful words: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life...." Knowing Thomas, I bet he was rolling his eyes and thinking something like "Yeah. Right. Whatever...."

That's just the kind of guy he was. So when Jesus had died, Thomas was pretty certain he was dead.

When Jesus comes back again a week later, Thomas gets his wish. Jesus lets him see him and hear him and touch him and even old Doubting Thomas couldn't hold out against evidence like that.

But knowing that not everyone would have that kind of one-on-one, face-to-face with him, Jesus adds: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

You see, for Jesus, it's not about the proof, the evidence, the rational argument. He is, he tells us, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. So faith is about the walking, the serving, the giving of self. Faith is about doing the right thing, even when it seems pointless or crazy. Faith is about refusing to lie about the doubts and the questions, refusing to turn away. Sometimes faith is about being painfully honest and asking: where are you, God? Why did you let that happen? Why have you forsaken me, as Jesus asked on the cross? And while we're on this subject, God, why are there so many homeless people in our city? What is in the air we breathe and the water we drink?

You see, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is the honesty of faith, the integrity of faith. Doubt propels truth. About everything. Everything in our hearts. Everything in this world. "Doubt enlivens belief by putting it at risk and compelling it to renew itself."

Thanks to Thomas, we can believe in a God who wants us to be honest and tell the truth about everything in our hearts. We can believe in a God who, through the witness of Jesus Christ, is honestly present in this world. We can believe in a God who embraces uncertainty and empowers prophets. We can believe in a God who breaks all the powers of darkness by going there first and then promises to be with us always. We can believe in a God revealed in the water, the bread, and the cup. We can believe in a Risen Savior who says: "see my wounded hands and side. Come, follow me. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Welcome, Ezra Joseph, to real faith.
Amen.

Notes:

Andrews, Ottoni-Wilhelm, Allen, eds. Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year C. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

William Irwin. "God is a Question, Not an Answer." New York Times: March 26, 2016.