

Easter 2B 2021 John 20:19-31 & Acts 4:32-35

The story of “Doubting Thomas” is always the appointed reading for the Second Sunday of Easter, which might be why most churches record historically low worship attendance on this day. Why would we need this story, since we’re not like Thomas; we’re good disciples who believe without having seen. I would argue that we shouldn’t be too quick to align ourselves with the disciples, and that we all are Thomas in a way.

The basic outline of the story is that on the evening after the resurrection, Jesus comes to the house where the disciples are hiding to encourage, inspire, and commission them. This is John’s version of what happens at Pentecost—Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples and sends them out to do God’s work. Thomas—for whatever reason—is not with them when Jesus visits. When the rest of the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the Lord, Thomas reacts in basically the same way they all reacted when Mary Magdalene told them that the tomb was empty and she had seen the Lord: they refuse to believe it until they see it for themselves. Jesus returns a week later—and, by the way, finds the disciples in the same place he left them, in spite of having equipped them and sent them out—and Jesus offers to Thomas the same experience that the others already had. Thomas makes his confession, “My Lord and my God!” And Jesus and John’s postscript offer some hope for those whose will have to believe based on the witness of others and not on a physical encounter like the first disciples had with Jesus.

Thomas appears in this story as, if not the bad guy, at least the one who is painted in the least flattering light. But is that really fair? We don’t know why Thomas wasn’t in the room for Jesus’ first visit. It’s possible that he was the one who had drawn the short straw—or even offered—to go do some act of service on behalf of the group: get groceries maybe, or even try to assess the danger from which the disciples were hiding. While everyone else was safe inside, Thomas was not. So Thomas doesn’t get to encounter Jesus like the rest of them do, which, as John tells us, was not just Jesus making an appearance but was Jesus gifting them with the Holy Spirit. The other disciples have been inspired by Jesus breathing the Spirit into them; Thomas has not. So is it any wonder that they believe when he doesn’t? But the other reason I’m not surprised at Thomas’ skepticism is that the other disciples don’t do what Jesus told them to do. Jesus clearly says he is sending them as the Father sent him; but a week later, they’re sitting right there. Why would Thomas believe that they had had this life-changing experience with the Lord if their lives didn’t change? Finally, it’s worth remembering that, in the end, it’s still not Thomas who is really the main actor here. Thomas doesn’t believe because he changes his own mind; Thomas believes because Jesus comes to him just like Jesus came to the others; Jesus inspires him just like Jesus inspired them.

Totally unrelated to my study of this text, I happened to be reading a book this week that challenged René Descartes famous insight, “I think, therefore I am.” Living in the first half of the seventeenth century, Descartes is considered one of the fathers of modern philosophy and rationalism, and those movements have altered the way we think and talk about belief. When we say that we *believe* something, what we generally mean is that we give intellectual assent to the idea. For Christians that often means being able to say we agree with the statements in the creeds or the catechism. But Jesus never said, “I think, therefore I am.” Jesus just said, “I am.” John’s gospel talks a lot about believing, but John is never talking about making a mental checklist of things we think are true about Jesus. For John, believing isn’t something you think but something you do. For Jesus, believing always means living in relationship with him. How would Thomas have been able to live in relationship with Jesus when he had not met the resurrected Christ? Can we even say the other disciples were believing the risen Jesus when they weren’t doing what he called them to do?

So what does this have to do with us? We confess that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our own works—not the work of doing *or the work of thinking* the right things about God. God comes to us, gives us his own Spirit, and changes us, just like Jesus came to Thomas and the disciples. Like Thomas, we don’t believe because someone else told us to; if we are living lives of Christian discipleship, it’s because Christ pursued us through other people who *showed us with their lives* what it means to be children of God. So as disciples who have been called into relationship with the living Lord, now *we* are sent to live transformed lives; it’s the only way we can spread the good news of the gospel—or as the old camp song says: *They’ll know we are Christians by our love*. As individuals or as the church, we cannot exclude someone from the Christian community, merely tell them that they should believe what we believe, and then live lives that don’t reflect the love of God in which we claim to participate. When we do that, *we’re* the cause of other people’s unbelief.

The good news is that the disciples eventually got it together. We know this because of the description of the Christian community that we read about in Acts: *the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership; everything they owned was held in common; there was not a needy person among them; they sold [their possessions] and the proceeds [were] distributed to each as any had need*. They had learned not to exclude anyone, and the church grew because they weren’t just preaching what Jesus preached, they were living how Jesus lived—a different life from those around them, a life transformed by reflecting the love of God. In this Easter season and beyond, may we not just say *Christ is risen!* May we live lives that show *He is risen in-deed!*