

Not Unless I See  
April 12, 2015  
John 20:19-31  
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We are accustomed to the bridge from Palm Sunday to Easter celebration—the move from crowds crying out “Hosanna” to Jesus in the streets of Jerusalem, a private meal with his closest friends, a command to love, a betrayal, crowds crying out “Crucify him”, his death, and then his resurrection. But there is another bridge from last Sunday to this one as we move into the stories of Jesus appearing to friends after his resurrection.

I know friends who don't speak of Holy Week at all but call that first bridge “Resurrection Week,” instead. Perhaps that may be a better term for this second bridge, or the first full week of Eastertide. Women find Jesus as the tomb—is he a gardener? was his body stolen? are they excited and joyful? are they afraid and silent? By this morning's text, every year, we sit with Thomas, the one who missed all of the initial findings and sightings, and he simply will not believe what friends are saying without being able to see Jesus for himself.

Palm Sunday leads to Easter leads to Thomas. It does not matter how many stories the friends share or how impassioned their speeches are, simply no proof will do for Thomas. He needs to see Jesus and touch him and feel his presence. And Jesus arrives, appears, apparates, and knows already what Thomas needs. Jesus knows they what they all need to hear, and he speaks “Peace” to all.

I imagine the gospel writer knows we will be familiar with Thomas' reaction. He is surely thinking of us as he weaves this tale because he knows the story is too much to comprehend even though we may long for an encounter with Jesus ourselves. How can you believe in something without seeing and touching and feeling close to the presence of it? How can we follow Jesus without hearing him bless us with words of peace? How can he send us out to serve if we did not feel him breathe his Spirit onto us? However can we experience life as he offers? One week after our resurrection celebration, this is maybe all too much to ask.

Not all of us claim to have felt a time when we knew with certainty that God was close. There are moments when time stands still and all is as it should be—moments of great beauty, great joy. We sense that God is present in these times. Elizabeth Gilbert wrote of her experience being drawn to the palm of God's hand at an ashram in India. In summer camp and retreat settings, we have spoken of mountain-top experiences that remind us of Moses and the disciples drawing near to God. We know we have experienced something Divine, and no words or proof will do to explain what happened.

After Mother Teresa died, her private writings and correspondence revealed she had vivid, mystical experiences in her early life that led her to her life's work in Calcutta with the poorest of the poor. She described hearing Jesus as a Voice and feeling great love for him. She followed his call “to India with the desire to love Jesus as he has never been loved before,” and then suddenly, and just as strongly, she no longer felt his presence.

“In a letter estimated to be from 1961, Teresa wrote: ‘Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason—the place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me—when the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God. ... The torture and pain I can't explain.’”<sup>1</sup>

Many people, particularly those outside of any tradition, seemed amazed by this revelation because people assume pillars of faith are also pillars of certainty. It came as a shock to many that she spent almost all of her adult life not sensing God's presence as she had as a very young woman. Not wanting her deepest pain and burden to be shared, she had requested that these letters be destroyed. Instead, her struggle was made public just 10 years after her death, and we discovered she faithfully served a God she no longer sensed. She gave herself to the world as a light in the darkness even though she herself could not find that light anymore.

Some headlines quickly pegged her as riddled with doubt. What's more sensational than a Doubting Teresa, right? But the sadness she carried was not doubt. She longed for presence, for peace, for a Jesus close as breath. Like Thomas, she did not believe God ceased to exist or move or work in the world. No, what she longed for was intimacy with that God. And the nagging question of God's presence did not hinder her determination to serve in the way of Jesus.

Nevertheless, Thomas and Teresa and anyone else who asks, “Where is God,” tend to get judged pretty harshly by those whose thoughts remain hidden and unpublicized. Their public confessions become “gotcha” moments. We spectators think we've caught them not being 100% committed to their faith the way we assume faith is supposed to be lived out. Or we've caught them being too much like us, and so we're disappointed. *If THEY can't figure this out, then how am I ever supposed to?*

In John's gospel this morning, the one who doesn't seem to have judgment for Thomas is Jesus. As soon as he appears before Thomas, he greets him with that word of Peace and allows Thomas the experience he had been asking for. And then, almost as if it's written for those of us who will not have such an encounter, Jesus offers one last beatitude: Blessed are those who believe and have not seen.

Doubt and faith are pretty closely intertwined, as we well know. And this second bridge from Resurrection to Thomas seems to highlight that. The week is filled with questions and stories from people who aren't quite sure what is happening. Jesus keeps appearing with a promise of peace, but not everyone knows what that's about, either. Maybe this week is our week. We are people of questions. We are people of doubt. We are people of darkness. Just as we are people of faith, people of light, people of hope.

One of our values here at St. Charles is asking questions. When we went through a community vision process last Fall, we heard a recurring theme that St. Charles has always been “the thinking person's church” or a place where you need both your brain and your Bible. As the conversation continued, we landed on the idea of asking questions as opposed to seeking answers because the process of asking is a constant one. This is a place unafraid of doubt or even heresy. Our friend Dr. Lanny Goldfinch has famously complained that this was the only church that would never kick him out for the outrageous things he said. We welcome doubters

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/augustweb-only/135-43.0.html>

and seekers and cynics and skeptics because we all know that Paul Tillich was right: “doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”<sup>2</sup>

It makes me endlessly happy to serve as pastor in a community that is comfortable with ambiguity, mystery, and holding the tensions of our faith tradition. I was always the kid who asked a lot of questions. One of my earliest memories of Sunday School is a time when I interrupted the teacher over and over again as she attempted to tell the morning’s Bible story. Blessed are the adults who take on the sacred work of the theological education of our young people for they will be interrupted. That morning I had a lot of questions, and the teacher finally stopped reading the story, put her hands on the Bible in her lap, and took a long, deep breath before she said, “Elizabeth, Sunday School is a time to listen to stories. Sunday School is not a time for asking questions.”

But I have always had questions. Lots of them. Big ones. And they didn’t go away. And what better place to ask my questions about God and faith and the stories of scripture than in the walls of the church. But not every church is prepared for uncertainty or challenge, and I am sure my younger self brought a healthy portion of both to class that day.

As an adult, I better understand Thomas and his need to see, touch, feel Christ’s presence. I ache with Teresa in the times when I serve and follow as best I know how without sensing God is near. And the beloved one who first helped guide me through the nagging questions, the darkness, the loneliness, the seeking, was Frederick Buechner.

“Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you’re going, but going anyway. A journey without maps...

Almost nothing that makes any real difference can be proved. I can prove the law of gravity by dropping a shoe out the window. I can prove that the world is round if I’m clever at that sort of thing—that the radio works, that light travels faster than sound. I cannot prove that life is better than death or love better than hate. I cannot prove the greatness of the great or the beauty of the beautiful.”

And Thomas well knew, the presence of Christ could not be described or narrated or validated by his friends; it must be experienced. Why does Jesus give Thomas this experience? Maybe because he loved him. Because he wanted to show the others that Thomas’ questions were okay. Because he wanted to bless each and every one of these followers before they went out to serve. Because ultimately, Christ’s words of peace matter more than any words of doubt.

Frank Crouch writes, “Whether we have the faith of Thomas or the faith described at the end of this passage, the goal is that we find our life...within the life of the crucified and risen Christ, who sends us out as his Father also sent him.”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, these encounters with the Risen Christ are more opportunities to embrace life in the way Jesus has demonstrated. Questions and doubts and wrestling are not foreign to God, in

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 30

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=564](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=564)

fact scripture tells us that God is intimately present in our genuine struggles. We must remember, however, whether in blessing or in wrestling, we are being called to life. It's easy to be a cynic and a skeptic. It's easy to let our questions and our doubts become reasons for not participating fully in life. But the point John is trying to drive home is that Jesus in life and in death and in the mystery to come wants us to live into fullness right now.

Do not hide from your life. Do not hide behind closed doors. Do not hide in the walls of this sanctuary. Do not hide from your beautiful self, made in the image of God, breathed into being by God's Spirit. Do not hide in your questions or your doubts or your certainty or your answers. Do not hide from the people who surround you who wish to be loved and blessed; who wish to love you and bless you. Do not miss out on the 24 hours of this new day and the 24 hours of the one tomorrow. Peace be with you, he says. My Spirit be with you, he promises. Go and serve and LIVE in my name, he blesses. Amen.