

Second Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2020

Gathering

Minister: Christ is risen.

Liturgist: Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

Minister: This is the day that the Lord has made.

Liturgist: Let us rejoice and be glad.

Minister: Together we worship the risen Lord.

Singing: 192 “Oh, How Good is Christ the Lord”

Oh, how good is Christ the Lord! On the cross he died for me.

He has pardoned all my sin. Glory be to Jesus.

Glory be to Jesus! Glory be to Jesus!

In three days he rose again. Glory be to Jesus.

Reconciliation

Liturgist: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Liturgist: In all of this we greatly rejoice, though for a little while we have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Singing: 639 “Lord, Have Mercy”

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on me.

Liturgist: Though we have not seen him, we love him. Though we do not see him now, we believe in him and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy, for we are receiving the end result of our faith, the salvation of our souls.

1 Peter 1: 3-9 adapted

Liturgist: Thanks be to God.

Proclamation

Soloist: “Open Our Eyes, Lord”

Bob Cull

Open our eyes, Lord; we want to see Jesus,
to reach out and touch him, and say that we love him.

Open our ears, Lord; and help us to listen.

Open our eyes, Lord; we want to see Jesus.

Scripture: John 20: 19-29

Sermon: "What to Believe"

Singing: 370 "My Soul Finds Rest"

My soul finds rest in God alone, my rock and my salvation;
a fortress strong against my foes, and I will not be shaken.
Though lips may bless and hearts may curse, and lies like arrows pierce
me, I'll fix my heart on righteousness; I'll look to him who hears me.

O praise him, hallelujah, my delight and my reward;
everlasting, never failing, my Redeemer, my God.

Find rest, my soul, in God alone amid the world's temptations;
when evil seeks to take a hold, I'll cling to my salvation.
Though riches come and riches go, don't set your heart upon them;
the fields of hope in which I sow are harvested in heaven.

I'll set my gaze on God alone and trust in him completely;
with every day pour out my soul, and he will prove his mercy.
Though life is but a fleeting breath, a sigh too brief to measure,
my King has crushed the curse of death, and I am his forever!

Dedication

Poem: "To know him risen" Luci Shaw

Is it obliquely
through time's telescope, thick-
lensed with two thousand Easters?
Or to my ear in Latin, three chanted
'Kyries' triumphing over a purple chancel?
Or in a rectangular glance at sepia snapshots
of Jerusalem's Historic Sites?
Can I touch him through the cliché crust
of lilies, stained glass, sunrise services?
Is a symbol soluble?
Can I flush out my eyes and rinse away
the scales?
Must I be there?
Must I feel his freshness
at an interval of inches? and sense, in-
credulous, the reassurance of warm breath?
and hear again the grit of stone
under his sandal sole?
those familiar Judean vowels
in the deep voicing of beatitude? recognize
the straight stance, quick eye,
strength, purpose, movement, clear command—
all the swift three-day antonyms of death
that spring up to dispel its sting,
to contradict its loss?

Must I be Thomas—belligerent in doubt,
hesitant, tentative, convinced, humbled, loved,
and *there*?
Must sight sustain belief?
Or is a closer blessedness
to know him risen—now
in this moment's finger-thrust of faith—here
as an inner eyelid lifts?

Prayer

Benediction

Singing: 950 "Go Now in Peace"

Go now in peace, go now in peace;
may the love of God surround you everywhere, everywhere you may go.

Worship Leaders

Piano/Liturgist/Vocals:	Erin Pacheco
Prayer/Liturgist/Vocals:	Lisa Dykstra
Liturgist/Vocals:	Karis Dykstra
Poem Reading:	Dan Diephouse
Sound Engineer:	Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister:	Roger Nelson

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Text: John 20: 19-29
Title: What to Believe
Date: 04.19.20
Roger Allen Nelson

I don't know what to believe.

I tend to trust doctors and scientists. They've studied and thought about these matters for decades. They have the cumulative knowledge of history and rational examination. They offer expectations based on data and scientific methodology. As they continue learning their models change, and they bump up against all manner of limitations, but they know far more than me.

I don't know what to believe.

I have family who think this has all gone too far so they're just going to exercise "common sense." They think they know better. I've listened to friends tell me that this is "shamdemic;" while others who work in hospitals tell me of wearing the same protective gear for days and putting two people to a body bag because they weren't prepared for the rate of death.

I don't know what to believe.

It's hard to believe politicians and pundits. Many of them lie. Some lie with impunity and complete indifference to factual record or what they said the day before. Many, maybe all of them, simply have too much self-interest at stake.

I don't know what to believe.

So, I lay awake, worry about what comes next, how will we recover, and should I get my papers in order and fill out end of life directives. What will church look like in the future, what more should I be doing as a pastor, did I wash my hands enough, and what kind of world will my kids and grandson inherit?

I don't know what to believe.

Dear friends, we come to belief by a mix of experience, reason, cultural construct and intuition (that's shaped by what I just mentioned) and by some engagement with God/Holy Spirit that is wholly outside of us. None of us are purely rational beings who come to belief by weighing all the evidence. We cling to what got us to this point. As Jonathan Haidt in The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion puts it:

You can't make a dog happy by forcibly wagging its tail. And you can't change people's minds by utterly refuting their arguments.

Coming to belief is a unique-remarkable-sometimes-difficult journey.

How did you come to believe what you believe? What is the mix of evidence and culture and experience and reason that led you to belief? How do you recalibrate belief when the vicissitudes of life make you redefine your sense of self and God?

And, what in this morning's text might help build resilience, nurture hope, and deepen our belief?

Let's say there were ten of them – Judas was gone and Thomas was at the store buying bread and wine. The other disciples were huddled together wondering, worrying, and not sure what to believe.

The text says they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, but scholars argue that there's little evidence that the religious establishment had the means or the moxie to initiate a campaign to clean up the followers of the one crucified. If the disciples were afraid it may have been a fear of their own making.

Maybe they felt foolish for following one who was crucified. Maybe they were frightened by the mystery of it all. If the body was gone, there was no telling what might happen next. Maybe they were hiding because they were the ones who denied and deserted him. Or, maybe they were hiding because if it was true, if Jesus had risen from dead, then everything that they knew about life and death was different than what it was....

But, whatever it was, they weren't out looking for Jesus, they were cowering in the corner when Jesus slips in among them.

For my money the post-resurrection stories are some of the most intriguing stories in scripture. Jesus appears and disappears. Vivid and vital enough that he can show his nail-torn-hands and his spear-split-side, but still muted and mysterious enough that those who knew him and loved him don't recognize him.

And! The detail in our text of the locked doors (twice) would suggest that Jesus didn't stand and knock, but that he simply appeared among them in some fashion.

Jesus greets them as if he has just returned from a long weekend and the disciples are flummoxed. So, to calm their fears Jesus shows them his wounds. He offers them the same evidence for which Thomas has been chided ever since.

Bertrand Russell - British philosopher, mathematician, scholar, agnostic - was asked what he would say if he met God on judgment day. Russell replied, "You gave insufficient evidence."

Because, in some way we all want evidence....

Luke writes that the disciples discredit the report of the women who went to the tomb as nonsense, rubbish, dung. At the time women couldn't even testify in court because they were regarded as unreliable witnesses. And, when Peter found the empty tomb, he leaves, not in confident proclamation, but in wonder. There is no evidence that the disciples knew what to make of the resurrection without some manner evidence. They don't respond in faith until they've had an encounter, an experience, that revealed it was true, real, tangible, believable...

Enter Thomas.

He's not satisfied with the reports of the others. And, seriously, who could blame him? The last time he saw Jesus, Jesus was beaten and bloodied and dying on a cross. This whole Jesus-thing didn't turn out the way that he expected.

So, let's say he moved on – there was work to do, bills to pay, the pieces of a life to cobble back together. What the disciples told him sounded like bollocks. He didn't know what to believe. Who would blame him that he wanted to “thrust” his hands into the side of Jesus in order to believe?

In some way we all want evidence.

In the absence of a body to poke we want other evidence....

Some find evidence in feeling God's presence.

Some look for it in the life of the community that follows Jesus.

Some see evidence that demands a verdict in how they read scripture.

Some claim evidence in circumstances and miracles.

Some take confidence in the faith they see in others.

Some find evidence in the healing of bodies, relationships, and lives.

Some look for a change in their own soul, spirit, self...

Again, you get the idea. We all want some manner of evidence that God in Christ was resurrected and is alive. For some that evidence comes easily and for others there is a gnawing skepticism that rarely rests – the questions are clearer than the answers.

Dear friends, not unlike the disciples we are behind locked doors wondering and worrying about what comes next. The questions are clearer than the answers. I don't know what to believe but I know that just under the surface there is a measure of anxiety and loneliness. Therapists will tell you that's a toxic mix. Gun sales and liquor sales have both seen a spike. Hoarding is rooted in fear. Mental health issues are exacerbated. The language of “war” and “front-lines” and the experiences of those we love who describe working in hospitals as unlike anything they've ever done before is unsettling. There is a fraying at the edges as many suggest the economic cost is not worth the lives that might be saved.

And it's all so invisible. Dr. Fauci described COVID-19 as “extraordinarily efficient” as a contagion and currently the only reliable tool we have to slow it's spread is social distancing and isolation. How do we live in a world when we can't see the enemy, its attack is indiscriminate and uneven, and we don't have access to testing to even identify its presence?

I don't know what to believe.

But, while I take some comfort in the inclusion of the story of Thomas in the gospels, the patron saint of human longing for evidence, or at the very least the recognition that doubt is part of the landscape of faith, it is worth noting that all the disciples bailed or betrayed Jesus in one way or another. They didn't always trust or understand what he said, they weren't always sure how to follow him,

they disappeared when he was in trouble, and they had no idea what to make of the news of his resurrection....

And yet, when Jesus appears among them his first words are:

Peace be with you.

There's no condemnation or criticism.

There's no word of repentance.

There's no checking orthodoxy.

There's no challenging them to do more or believe more.

There is just Jesus extravagantly and preemptively announcing peace.

And, then he breathes on them, commissioning them to do the same.

This text is often referred to as "John's Pentecost."

It is the gift of the Spirit, the gift of faith or belief....

So, what if Jesus would appear among us, even now, wherever we are hunkered down, and simply speak, "Peace be with you." In the midst of all that you might fear, "Peace...." In the midst of all that you're uncertain of, "Peace...."

You belong to God in Christ.

You belong to the one who entered into human suffering, fear and abandonment, even unto death, that you might know life in abundance. The work of God in Christ, in death and resurrection, is the *shalom*, the peace, of creation. May we rest in that reality – free from fear and called to love and serve.

There is here a sort of post-resurrection beatitude. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

I don't know what to believe about how this pandemic and it's economic and human toll will unfold but I believe in the resurrection. I believe in the power of God in Christ over death. And therefore, even when we can't see may we have the faith to side with forgiveness over retaliation, mercy over judgment, hope over despair, and love over fear. May we side with belief over doubt, and life over death. And in that, we are called "blessed."

Thanks be God.

Amen.