

I'm a Doubting Thomas
John 20:19-31
The Rev. Layne Brubaker
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
April 16, 2023

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight o lord our strength and redeemer....

If you attended the 9am Easter service last week you witnessed a very funny and delightful moment during the Children's meditation. During the children's message I was using flowers as a metaphor of resurrection and as a sign of hope eventually leading the kids to place their flowers on the cross as a sign of resurrection hope, and doing so I made the comment that when we put a seed in the ground and cover it with dirt. It might seem as though nothing good can come from that, and then I sort of mistakenly said "it can seem almost like magic when a plant blooms and eventually produces a beautiful flower." Butut one kid with a sort of exasperated look on his face said "it's not magic.... It's science" :), which got a huge laugh from the congregation, and has been quoted to me more times than I can count this week.

In truth it was sort of a slip of the tongue when I even said the word magic, and for all of you who were at the 11:00 service I'll let you in on a secret that I was being **very careful** to not say the word magic in describing this scientific phenomenon. But what nobody here knows is that a constant debate Crawford (my husband) and I have is about the word magic. Crawford was in attendance at the 9:00 service last week and he almost stood and applauded when the kid made his comment :) Does magic have any place in our faith? Crawford says No and I say, maybe. Wine into water; seems like magic to me, or maybe more appropriately Crawford and I can agree and maybe you can as well. It is actually mysterious.

Faith, and especially a faith like ours, means having to hold a good amount of mystery. A man executed on a cross, coming back to life three days later is at the very heart of our faith and is itself a mystery. Truth be told there is nothing certain or sure when it comes to belief; no human construct including Science can explain all of the mysteries of our faith.

When I worked as a hospital Chaplain there was always this moment that would happen, when there would be a shift in the room, where the abilities of Doctors and medicine had approached its end, and where the Chaplain became the one with authority, that shift happened when the inevitability of death was realized. Death is both certain and mysterious. We can have thoughts, ideas about what happens when we make the journey from this life into whatever comes next, but the reality is that it is mysterious.

Several years ago, right before I came to Lewinsville, my grandfather passed away, and just a couple of days after his death I was sitting outside, grieving, and praying, and I was asking God in the deepest parts of my heart for a sign. I wanted to know that my Grandfather was with God. I knew that my Christian belief was that he was with God, but my grieving heart had a sort of guttural doubt. And while I was sitting there a butterfly appeared and rested on my knee for what seemed like hours, but in reality, was more like a 1 minute or 2, but it was long enough to feel special. As if it was the sign I was looking for.

Later that afternoon I was scrolling through facebook (apparently God can even use facebook) someone posted an article about “butterflies being a sign of a successful transition”. At that moment I felt sure that God had appeared in the way I needed. It’s not science; it’s not magic either. It’s the mystery of our faith. In my worst days I doubt that the butterfly was anything other than a coincidence, something just to make myself feel better, but on my good days, I know that it was more.

Our Gospel passage today opens with the disciples huddled together in a room, afraid and uncertain of what to do next. They had just witnessed the death of their beloved teacher and friend, the one whom they had put all their trust. And now following that horrific and traumatic event there have been rumors circulating that he had risen from the dead. But that just seemed too good to be true. Before Jesus had been executed, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, but is Jesus actually able to raise himself from the dead?

The disciples were gathered in a room hiding and fearful that what had happened to Jesus would happen to them, so they had locked the door to keep themselves safe and separated from the outside world. And Then Suddenly, Jesus

appeared among them and spoke the words, "Peace be with you.... As the father has sent me so I send you."

The disciples are obviously overjoyed to see Jesus and celebrate his return, but then Jesus "breaths on them" a moment that connects to the Genesis story when God breathed life into Adam. The Gospel of John opens stating:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him,

Jesus is the word, who was God in the beginning, Who breathed life into Adam in the garden and now in this resurrection appearance is breathing new life into the disciples. By breathing on the disciples Jesus is sending them out into the world to share the good news of resurrection; staying locked in a room and hiding from the outside world is not an option for the followers of Jesus. In the gospel of John, Jesus' resurrection changes how life operates for his followers. When Jesus appears after his resurrection his instruction is to stop holding onto the past, this new life, is a new beginning, in this new post resurrection life means that Jesus' disciples and us are sent to go and shout the good news! To tell everyone we see that true hope, new life, and resurrection is for all people we are not held back to sit in death, but we are set free from death. To proclaim the truth that in the darkest moments, the crucifixion of Jesus is not the end, rather Jesus is alive! And that we are called to keep on growing, keep on planting, keep on proclaiming the resurrection! Christ is Risen!

However, one of the disciples, Thomas, was not present when Jesus appeared to the rest. When Thomas returned to the locked room the disciples tell Thomas that they had seen Jesus! But Thomas is skeptical and declares that he would not believe unless he saw the wounds in Jesus' hands and side for himself.

And thus Thomas is known forever as "Doubting Thomas". The phrase "doubting Thomas," is often used to describe someone who is skeptical or unwilling to believe something without proof. I think this label is a bit unfair in that Thomas was not alone in his doubt. In fact, all of the disciples initially doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead until they saw him for themselves.

And even after seeing Jesus, some of them still struggled to believe. They are all still sitting in a locked room.

But the history of Christian interpretation has been to label Thomas as the doubter and to use him as an example of someone we should not be like. In the Gospel text there is a detail that is often overlooked. Thomas is described as being known as “The Twin” but other than this reference we do not know anything about Thomas’ twin sibling. I wonder if Thomas' twin is the reader of the gospel. All of us, I wonder if we are the twin, we are his twin because the author of John assumes we also doubt Jesus' resurrection. We are only hearing/ reading about this good news. We do not experience the resurrection moment for ourselves, and we are having to trust the eye witness accounts of others, and we may want to demand proof, irrefutable facts, that Jesus is alive. But that is not something we are going to get. We have to accept the mystery of our faith and believe the testimony of others about this resurrection moment.

Yet, doubt is a natural part of the human experience and the life of faith. Doubt is not something to be ashamed of or hidden away. Rather I believe that Doubt is an honest part of true faith. As Christians we are free to have Doubts and free to explore them. Theologian Paul Tillich states "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is in truth one element of faith." It is through our doubts and questions that we can come to a deeper understanding of God and our relationship with God.

A blue grass band that is fairly popular called Nickel Creek has a Song Entitled *Doubting Thomas*... a phrase from that song:

Can I be used to help others find truth
When I'm scared that I'll find proof that it's a lie
I'm a doubting Thomas
I can't keep my promises
O' me of little faith

The song is itself beautiful (the melody and instruments) and the lyrics are a person struggling with their faith in the afterlife. And the lyrics are an honest expression of their general anxiety and belief in God. But what I think is beautiful about this song, about Thomas’ story in the bible and us “the twin” who also have

doubts and questions about Jesus is that from This gospel text we witness that Thomas's vulnerability and expression of his doubt led to encountering Jesus.

A week later, Jesus appeared to the disciples again, and this time, Thomas was present. Jesus invited Thomas to touch his wounds and to believe. Thomas is overcome with emotion and declares, "My Lord and my God!" an incredibly profound affirmation of his faith in Jesus, one of the strongest recorded in the Bible. The spiritual practice of being honest with our doubt is affirmed by Jesus in this moment, because Jesus doesn't shame Thomas or scold him, but instead offers him the proof he needed."

The resurrected Christ will meet you where you are and where you need him. And yes, Jesus does say "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" but it is awfully good news (To a Doubting Thomas like me) that Jesus also blesses Thomas. We can be thankful that Jesus is in the business of meeting people where they are. As one Biblical commentator states:

"Jesus is like a good doctor, in that he does not give the same prescription to everyone. Instead, he approaches his followers in different ways because, after all, our experiences are different and our approaches to life are different. Jesus finds a way to bless us all."

According to the Gospel of John that is the way Jesus handles doubt. He gives us what we need. Our gospel text concludes this passage by saying

"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 (us! The twin) may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah."

That is the way most of us have come to believe. We did not see or touch Jesus, we were not there. Someone told us the story in a way that invited us to say yes, and for all of us who need more than just reading the story in the Bible the resurrected Jesus meets us there as well!! There are so many ways to encounter the risen Christ:

At the communion table we feast upon Jesus love for us
Through Sacred Music that we listen and participate in
Through Fellowship with one another
Through caring and being cared for by our siblings in Christ
A Butterfly sitting on your knee

The Sunrise on Easter Sunday morning
The birds chirping and singing God's Glory every morning
All the signs of spring and new life that surround us right now
And so many other ways the Holy Spirit is made present in our midst- we just have to have the lenses on to see it.

The gospel of John tells us that not only are our doubts and questions okay, but they are an honest part of our faith and that we can say what we need and Jesus will meet us there. The **good news of Easter Sunday is hard to believe, we are one week out, and the doubt of the good news has already set in (at least for me), it can be hard to believe but** From Thomas' story we can know Jesus is still showing up where we need him, even in the midst of our pain and uncertainty. Jesus is patient with our doubts and our questions, and he invites us to come to him and see for ourselves. Let us remember that Jesus is still showing up where we need him. Jesus is still patient with our doubts and questions. May we have the courage to come to him with open hearts and minds, and eyes to see all the ways that Jesus is present in our midst. Amen

Join me in Prayer:

Holy God, God of grace, you move through locked doors, and into our places of fear and doubt. We are grateful for the peace Christ offers and his encouragement to go out into all the world sharing the good news of Easter- that Death has been defeated... For Christ is Risen, has risen indeed. Amen.