

“Giving Doubt Its Due” GPPC 4-3-16  
Psalm 150, John 20:19-31

Garrison Keillor says, “Easter is that time of year when Christians ask themselves two questions. Do I really believe all this stuff? And if so, why do I live this way?” (Quoted by Shawnthea Monroe in *The Christian Century*, March 16, 2016, 23.)

Welcome to the Second Sunday of Easter! That rowdy full sanctuary of last Sunday has given way to the usual suspects—you people. Nice to see you, faithful friends in Christ.

Most years on the first Sunday that follows Easter Sunday we look at this story in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s gospel. It’s a story about doubt and faith, no doubt, but even more a story about *God’s* faithfulness in Jesus Christ.

John says it was Easter evening of the day when Jesus was resurrected. He was resurrected on the first day of the week; that’s why we worship on Sundays rather than Saturdays. And the disciples were hiding behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews.”

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Hmm. Pause a second. In his gospel, John sometimes talks about “the Jews,” in very negative ways. And we need to be careful not to hear him uncritically and out of context. As one scholar points out “the Jews” “does not include all Jews...[the Jews named in John’s gospel] are probably best understood...as an alliance of Judean leaders, the elite based in Jerusalem who exercised considerable religious, sociopolitical, and economic power as allies of the occupying Romans. They plot to kill Jesus (5:18; 11:45-47).” (Warren Carter in *The Discipleship Study Bible, NRSV including Apocrypha*, 1831) And as somebody else has suggested, whenever you notice a negative reference to “the Jews” in John’s gospel it might be good simply to substitute in your mind “the Presbyterians.”

So it was Easter evening, and the disciples of Jesus were hiding out behind locked doors, scared, for fear of the Presbyterians. But then Jesus showed up. The locked doors were no match for him. Jesus showed up.

Jesus has a way of doing that, you know. We lock ourselves behind the closed doors of our fears. “I’m a failure. I’m no good. My mistakes are unforgiveable. My life has no purpose. It’s no use. I give up. The world is going to hell and I’m going with it.”

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But then Jesus shows up. Actually, he was there with us all along. And maybe we hadn't noticed or we'd forgotten. But now we see.

Have you ever had that happen to you? You were in trouble, filled with fear, maybe at your breaking point. But Jesus busted right through the locked doors, came to you and said, "Peace be with you."

Jesus in his resurrected body was not constrained by a little thing like a locked door. He just came, stood among the quivering disciples and said, "Peace be with you."

After he said that Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his side. "Then," says John, "The disciples rejoiced when they *saw* the Lord." Now isn't that odd? Why didn't the disciples *see* Jesus at first? Why did they finally *see* him only after he showed them his hands and his side?

A character in one of Cormac McCarthy's novels says, "Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real. The events that cause them can never be forgotten, can they?" (Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 135.)

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The past is real. And the disciples who bear their own scars *see* the Lord once they see *his* scars. Jesus comes to them not as a disembodied friendly ghost, not as pleasant memory, not as somebody who lived a carefree, pain-free life but as the crucified, risen, embodied Lord.

And what does this mean for us in our own resurrection to come? A professor says maybe our inner and outer scars and all the experiences, good and bad, that have shaped us, don't just fade away in the resurrection. Maybe they're maintained as part of our link with the past. But these scars and experiences are converted by God into something new. As the professor puts it, "... in the resurrection, God is capable of taking even the worst of human experiences into God's own arms in such a way that they are transformed, and we are healed and made whole—not only each of us individually but the whole human family, indeed, the whole creation." (Kristin Johnston Lergen in *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol. 2*, 328 and 330.)

After Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his side, his scars, then they recognized and rejoiced. And Jesus said, "Peace be with you" again. Why? Maybe because the first time, it was understood only as a

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typical greeting. But once the disciples saw the scars and knew who Jesus was, then the words were not merely a greeting; they were empowering words. “Peace be with you,” said Jesus. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And then Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “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.” In other words, Jesus empowered the church to shape Christian ethics for every generation.

And we know that to be true, don't we? In each generation, we see the Holy Spirit at work granting us new understanding of what is retained and called sin and what is not.

There was a time when slaves were told to be obedient to their masters or it was a sin. Then we heard the Holy Spirit saying, “That's nonsense. They must be free.”

There was a time when people said, “Women are the weaker vessel. Let them be silent in the church. And let them obey their husbands. They must not lead; it's a sin.” And then we heard the Holy Spirit say, “Preposterous. Men and women are equals.”

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There was a time when interracial marriage was called a sin. Then the Holy Spirit said, “Ridiculous. Live in love.”

And there was even a time when we were told, “LGBT folks must repent. Anything less is sin.” And then we heard the Holy Spirit say, “Enough! They are children of God, precious just as they are, and they are to be treated with dignity, as beloved as all God’s children. Anything less is a sin.”

Can you see how the Holy Spirit works among us? We are slow to hear sometimes, but the Holy Spirit keeps nudging, pushing, gradually awakening us to truth.

Every year when church office staff fills out demographic paperwork for our congregation to send to the denominational headquarters, one of the questions on the questionnaire is, “How many of your members are hearing impaired?” And I always want to write, “Everybody, including the pastors!” We’re slow to hear the Spirit, aren’t we? Sometimes it takes years for change to come. Sometimes people are resistant to change. But the Spirit that Jesus breathed is relentless.

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Of course, Thomas missed out on the encounter with the risen Lord. He wasn't there for the "Peace be with you," the scars, the Spirit breathed, and ethical authority bestowed upon the church. So Thomas asked for some proof. "Just let me see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger in the nail marks and my hand in his side. Otherwise, I won't believe." Thomas wanted some evidence. Doesn't that make sense?

I sometimes run into people who want to tell me why they don't believe in God or why they quit a mean church. And I borrow from another pastor and say, "Tell me about the god you don't believe in. Chances are, I don't believe in that god either." Or "Tell me about the church you left. Maybe it's different from the one I go to. Maybe you would feel at home with us."

The other thing that sometimes happens is that people have gotten the idea that you can't have faith if you also accept many of the claims of science. But that's not true for us, is it? Most of us accept that the earth is billions of years old, that the world is involved in some sort of evolutionary process (a miracle in itself), that people discover their

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sexual orientation rather than choose it, and so on. We accept many of the claims of science, don't we?

Yet we also say there are limits to what science explains and will ever be able to explain. Some favorite questions. "Why is there something rather than nothing?" We say, "God in goodness, power, and love created all that is seen and unseen." And science says, "Um. Okay." "Why is there so much beauty in the world? Isn't it unnecessary?" "Why is there joy and kindness and fun?" Is this all just part of some grim utilitarian evolutionary process—survival of the fittest? That seems unlikely, doesn't it?

You don't have to leave your brain at the door of this sanctuary. It's okay to have some doubts about faith and to ask questions. That's what helps us grow as people and as Christians.

So Thomas wanted evidence. And Jesus could've said, "Hey, I came and you weren't here. You don't want to believe? Fine." Jesus could have said that.

But he didn't. Apparently, he made a special trip just for Thomas. The doors were shut. Jesus showed up again. "Peace be with you," he

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said. “Thomas, put your finger here. See my hands. Put your hand in my side. Don’t doubt but believe.”

And it doesn’t say whether Thomas touched Jesus (probably not). But maybe the words and the scars were enough for him. “My Lord and my God!” he said.

And then all of a sudden the story ends not back in the first century but right here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. “Have you believed because you’ve seen me?” asked Jesus. “Well, blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe.” Who is that message for? That message is for you and me and for all the believers who will come later. John says there’s so much more that could have been written about Jesus, but this is written so we will have life by believing in him. Life not merely by believing there *was* a Jesus. No. Life by believing *in*, investing ourselves in this resurrected, scarred, Spirit-breathing, ethics-shifting Lord of all.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Many years ago now, a wise old priest invited me to come speak at his church in Alabama. ‘What do you

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want me to talk about?’ I asked him. [He said] ‘Come tell us what is saving your life now.’” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, xv.)

What’s saving our life now? Time in daily prayer and reading scripture. Worship together. Fellowship and study with other Christians. Exercise outside. Laughter. Service to others. Doing justice. Believing *in* Jesus, not just believing *about* Jesus.

It’s okay to have doubts. Start by doubting our worst assumptions about ourselves and the world. Doubt those because Jesus has a habit of showing up when least expected and God calls each and every one of us precious and adored.

Doubt that oppression and injustice last forever, because the Holy Spirit just won’t give up speaking, even if we’re hard of hearing.

Doubt that science has all the answers and faith has none. Doubt that. And while we’re at it, doubt that suffering and death have the last word. Our scars remind us that the past was real, but God is transforming the past, the present, and the future.

Give doubt its due. And give God our faith, hope, and love that we may have life in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal