A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

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*So That You May Believe*

John 20.19-31

Easter reflections . . .

The Gospel reading for this Sunday brings us to Thomas. Thomas has only three lines in the gospel. Each time he speaks it’s with a sense of pessimism or skepticism. This makes him a favorite target for some people, and simply a favorite for others. Do you resent Thomas or do you love him?

Thomas’ most well-known moment of being Thomas we read this morning in the resurrection story. Thomas was off doing his own thing while the other disciples were gathered together where the resurrected Jesus appears among them, in a closed room. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says. When Thomas returns to them, they tell him what he missed: Jesus is alive! To which Thomas is incredulous. I don’t believe you, he says. I don’t believe any of you. I don’t believe all of you together. I won’t believe unless he’s standing here, right here in front of me, and I touch his wounds.

What’s going on here? What did Thomas think was happening in what they were telling him? They were pulling his leg? I think it’s far too serious for that. Then what? They were misguided, wishful thinkers because it’s too good to be true. Whatever Thomas thought was going on, what he knew for sure was that unless he had first hand evidence that Jesus who was definitely dead, is alive again, he will not believe.

One commentator says that Thomas appears to be a man not inclined to joy. I disagree. That doesn’t seem right to me at all. Thomas may be a bit of a curmudgeon, but sometimes curmudgeons feel joy the deepest, and sometimes doubters hold the true essence of faith: accept no cheap imitations. Joy is too serious and faith is too important to waste on wishful thinking or warm feelings. Don’t tell me it **feels** like Jesus is back. That’s not good enough: feelings fade. An un-resurrected Jesus is a nice inspiration. A resurrected Jesus is worth staking your life and possibly your death on. The difference is everything.

A week after these things, Jesus appears again to the disciples. This time, Thomas is with them. I imagine Thomas had told them, “I’m not going anywhere. You go get the groceries.” He’s ready this time. I like that so much. Someone once said, you can’t make the sun come up in the morning, but you can be there when it rises. Thomas said I’m not going anywhere until I see the Son Rise! (play on words intentional there). If he appears again, I’m want to be in the room where it happens.

So, he was there, and Jesus appeared. And Thomas doesn’t even need what he thought he needed. He doesn’t need to touch his wounds; he doesn’t need to put his finger in Jesus’ side. Thomas had enough, “My Lord and my God.” Thomas believed.

Thomas’ belief is the crowning moment in John’s gospel. It’s not all about Thomas; but it’s all about belief. John tells us straight forward, “Everything I have written, so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name.” John writes that for us. For all of us who were not there , all of us who read this gospel, who hear about Jesus. This is for us, that we may come to believe and may have life in his name. Belief is a mystery, a gift, especially for all of us, unlike Thomas, who believe without seeing. When you believe, it’s not that you feel like you’ve accomplished something, you feel like something has come alive in you. Something’s been unleased within you and you are set free from something that was holding you back to trust and walk in a future where you walk in faith.

In this story in John 20, the word believe is used 6 times. We’ve seen it all over this story, from “I will not believe,” to “Do not doubt but believe,” to “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” John’s attention to the journey of faith is more than in this story though, this is the just the crowning moment.

In the other gospels, the word believe is used about 10x each. In John’s gospel, the word believe is used 86 times.

In chapter 1, John the Baptist comes to witness so that all might believe through him; and those who believe are given power to become children of God. Throughout the gospel Jesus turns water to wine, gives sight to the blind, heals the lame and performs many signs that leads many to believe. In John 9, Jesus heals a blind man who doesn’t yet know who he is. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Jesus asks. Who is he that I may believe on him? It is he standing in front of you. Lord, I believe.

Of course, John 3.16, “For God so loved the world he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

John’s gospel from beginning to end, poses this question to us over and over and over again: Do you believe? Do you believe yet? Jesus asks Thomas, “Now do you believe?” but it’s as if the question is for all of John’s readers for all time, like Jesus is not just talking to one man Thomas but to every man, woman, child for all time, “Now, do you believe?” It’s not an antagonistic question; it’s not an accusation. It’s an invitation. And it’s one that deserves a fresh and heartfelt examination in all of our hearts: now do you believe?

In the beginning of John’s gospel, we are introduced to the Word who was with God and was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. Now here at the end of the gospel, life that was in the eternal Word made flesh is offered to us, who through believing have life in his name.

I don’t think belief can be forced upon someone, not least of which ourselves. We can’t make ourselves believe something by gritting our teeth, squeezing our eyes, and demanding belief, but we can also be inattentive to the ways faith is already within us waiting for an outward response. For many people that response feels more like surrender than an accomplishment. Surrender to confession of faith, surrender to baptism, and certainly surrender to a life lived as a Christian. Surrender is usually an unhappy word, but here it is a happy word. In surrendering, we give to Christ all that is within us, all of our faith and our doubts, what we know and understand and all that is still beyond our understanding; we give to Christ our goodness and our not-so-goodness; we give to Christ the very best of ourselves, and we give to him all that is not our very best. We give as much of ourselves as we can to as much of God as we know. It’s not too long before we realize that faith is trust. And the fullness of life is all about trust. Faith certainly is. Faith is not certainty; it is trust in all that remains uncertain in the conviction that Jesus Christ is worthy of our trust. Faith at its heart is trusting him to be lowered into his death and raised to new life.

Thomas gives words to this, “My Lord and my God.” You’ve noticed the personal pronouns. My Lord, My God. These are our words as well. When we talk with children and youth who grow up in church about faith, that’s one of the things we talk about. You’ve learned about the Lord. You’ve learned about God. You’ve learned about faith. Now, are you ready to make it your own? This faith of your parents, your teachers, your pastors, are you ready to say MY Lord, MY God. When you are, you’re ready. We’ll help you think through your faith and grow in your faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. That’s a life time journey, and we’re all on that journey together. That’s life, the life Jesus promised us, to have life in his name. That’s the journey you’ll go on, that begins with the simple profession, this faith is now… this journey of immersion in the faith and in the waters of baptism and all that it calls of me the rest of my life.

There are some churches where this question is put before you every single Sunday. Those of you who are growing up here, I want you to hear that. Some churches put this question before you every Sunday, “Now do you believe?” Every Sunday, “Now do you believe?” If you do, come down to the front, meet the pastor, pray, and make a profession of faith. We don’t do that, putting that question before you at the end of every sermon, singing a hymn while you leave your chair and come down the aisle to the pastor. Instead, we invite you to talk with the pastor when there’s a little more time and a little more space where you can visit and think together and pray together. We like to ask you about what’s stirring inside you, and we like to do it over a milkshake, or just a quiet talk and prayer. Even adults can drink milkshakes and talk about Jesus.

So we don’t do that in our church, but I did that when I was young in my church, as I’m sure many other people here did, too. While a hymn was being sung, I walked a very long aisle, very nervously, to meet a pastor I didn’t know all that well and who was pretty intimidating, to talk about my faith in Christ that I was only beginning to understand, to be baptized in a baptistry I’d never looked into (in our church it wasn’t a cow trough). That’s my story. We all have our stories. I met a man this week who told me that 20 years ago he was a long-haired hippie hitchhiking around the state. It started happening along the way that one person after another who would pick him up and give him rides talked to him about the Lord. One day, he figured it was the Lord talking to him through them. And he just said, Jesus, I believe. You are my Lord and my God. He said life has never been the same since then. His enthusiasm helped me remember, on Easter week, that life in the name of Jesus is joyful, and it’s offered to each person.

He said, it’s good to be in the Lord. It is good. Faith is a gift given by God, received by human hearts who respond with our brother Thomas, my Lord, my God, my Life. Amen.

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