

“Thomas – A Place for the Skeptic”

April 12, 2020

A Place at the Table series – Easter Sunday – Livestream

Well, let’s just get the obvious out of the way. Today feels different. This Lent was the “lentiest Lent” ever. And today, there’s the obvious joke and irony – empty tomb - empty church (building). This year, Easter feels different. No showing off Easter clothes or finding eggs with friends. No family dinner. No gathering in the same physical space to celebrate resurrection. And it really does grieve me. It’s not the same.

But Easter has never been about new clothes or egg hunts or a really good meal or even being present together in the same space. Today is about resurrection – and nothing can spot it. If we want to get real – really centered in Scripture – when it comes to how the celebration of resurrection happened, we might be as close as we’ve ever been before! That doesn’t lessen grief and disappointment we might feel today. It doesn’t mean that we ignore the real need for healing and prayer all around us, but it offers some hope.

And, in the end, that’s what we celebrate – hope - along with the deep, deep love of God to overcome the sting of death. And we claim faith in a risen Savior. We pray that faith outweighs fear as we gather with millions of others to put our trust in Jesus, the risen Christ.

So maybe we can relate a little better this year. Mary Magdalene *alone* outside in the garden, Jesus appearing to her, and his directive that *she* go and tell the others – the first witness to resurrection. But we don’t know how the disciples responded after she and Peter and John shared the news.

What we do know is that same evening the disciples were together behind locked doors – *sheltered in place* feeling a mix of fear and grief – maybe even some guilt. Maybe talking to each other. Maybe not. Maybe trying to process what they’d heard from Mary Magdalene and figure out what to do next. Had they been out at all to check Mary’s story? It would seem that they didn’t take Mary at her word. Instead, they were scared that they might meet the same fate as their Teacher Jesus.

And Jesus comes to where they are. But let’s be honest: Jesus breaks in! Remember Mary went to the tomb “while it was still dark” early in the morning. Resurrection happens even when it’s still dark, even when life is uncertain. Now Jesus comes in the evening when it’s getting dark. Resurrection happens in moments of darkness when things aren’t quite clear. And that’s a comfort for us today.

Resurrection happens when “the doors are locked.” Jesus breaks in and offers “peace.” He shows the disciples his wounds. They are overjoyed, and Jesus offers

“peace” again. He tells them that he’s sending them, breathes the Holy Spirit on them, and gives them their marching orders concerning forgiveness.

Disciples – then and now – them and us - everyone commissioned to go out in the name of Jesus – disciples are to do what Jesus did. We’re called to love others so that others might believe in the power of God’s love to forgive. We’re witnesses to what God’s love can do. Our charge is to share the love and hope – and the peace – we find in Jesus.

Thomas misses all of this and simply can’t believe it when the others say, “We have seen the Lord.” I still wonder where Thomas was when it all went down. Thomas gets the label “doubter,” but remember that the disciples didn’t believe Mary at first either. It’s natural that Thomas would’ve been skeptical of what he was hearing just like the others were before Jesus broke in. Is it a surprise that Thomas has a tough time taking their word for it? They use the same line as Mary Magdalene: “We have seen the Lord!”

And before we get on the “doubting Thomas” kick, it’s worth remembering more about him. Back to John, chapter 11, Jesus plans to go to visit Lazarus’ family in Bethany after Lazarus dies. At this point, there is a lot of opposition to Jesus, and to go to Bethany is dangerous. Jesus is just asking for trouble, but Thomas says to the others, “Let’s go, too – that we may die with him.” He has great courage and stands in solidarity with Jesus.

We hear from Thomas in John 14 when Jesus is encouraging the disciples to believe in him and when Jesus promises that he is going to prepare a place for them. Thomas shares his confusion: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Then, Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Thomas is honest enough to admit that he doesn’t get it. And Jesus offers words of hope to him and us.

So Thomas isn’t without faith and trust in Jesus, but he wants more. He wants to see for himself just like everyone else has. Jesus obliges him a week later, but I wonder about that week in-between. What was the conversation like? Did the disciples try to convince Thomas that Jesus had been raised from the dead just as he had promised? Did Thomas respond or just listen? Did they get frustrated with each other being in the same space together? Wasn’t their word enough for him?

Jesus comes back a week later, offers “peace” again, and shows his wounds to Thomas. Jesus comes to people in chaos, struggle, doubt, grief, and dis-ease – not with “I told you so” on his lips, but with life and peace and love – with grace that allows us to have a restored relationship with God. So we hear Thomas say, “My Lord and my God!”

God works in our lives – giving us an experience of Jesus that’s real, that meets our needs, and that moves us to deeper faith.

And when Thomas calls Jesus “My Lord and my God!” it’s his witness of faith. In the time of the Roman Empire, kings were called “lord and god,” so for Thomas to claim these titles for Jesus shows Jesus’ power and authority in his life. It means that he rejected the powers of this world and believes in Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

So I wonder why Jesus says all that about believing without seeing. The disciples were given the opportunity to experience Jesus personally. Maybe he knew they needed proof – something real to cling to so that they really would believe it was him. He wasn’t just a spirit. He was there in that room for real. So what would Thomas say to us?

SHOW MEDIA – *He came back for me...*

So maybe this Scripture isn’t so much about Thomas as it is about Jesus – and Jesus’ desire to become real to us no matter if we have doubts. It’s about how Jesus comes to us so that we might believe. And if we’re honest, we’ve been there with Thomas - a doubter, a skeptic, a seeker – as one who struggles.

Haven’t we wanted some hard evidence that God is at work – that there really is hope in the midst of tragedy? Even now, we’ve had moments of asking God to be more real to us as we struggle with the news of more infected and more dead from this virus. No doubt we’ve asked God to help us in moments when we’re afraid for ourselves, our loved ones, and so many who are working hard on the front lines. We’ve asked God to show us clearly how and where God is at work. We’ve asked God to show up!

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Unbelief is. And if we’re honest, faith is not an absence of doubt, but faith is something we hold onto in the presence of doubts. Faith is not having all the answers, but trusting even when we don’t. That’s where growth happens, and that’s what Jesus calls Thomas to claim.

Tennyson said, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” Frederick Buechner still has one of the best lines about doubt: “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” And Natalie Sleeth says it well in “Hymn of Promise” that we’ll sing today: “In our doubt, there is believing...” Doubts, questions, and wonder are part of faithful living.

There’s a place at the table for the skeptic. There’s always been a place for those who wrestle and ask questions and wonder – and those who have doubts. Doubt and skepticism don’t keep Jesus away. Hesitation and confusion don’t keep Jesus away. Jesus shows up for Thomas. Jesus shows up even behind locked doors and in fearful times and makes himself known among us – and even offers peace - so that we can support one another in our doubts and questions and wonderings.

Nobody believed resurrection just because someone told them. Nobody claimed resurrection without an experience of the risen Christ. And that's why we're gathered together. You're here and I'm here – we're here – not simply because *someone told us* that Jesus is alive. We're here because Jesus is alive, and we have hope in him. Even if we have doubts today, that doesn't limit God's work in our lives. God is thankful that we engage the struggles we have rather than not caring about them at all!

So offer all of yourself – not just what you think God wants to hear, but even the struggles and doubts you have – and know that God cares. Thomas reminds us that God can handle it.

Thanks be to God for the presence of the risen Christ who is with us, who comes to us right where we are. Thank God who meets us and walks with us. Thank God for the hope of resurrection and the joy of new life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MINISTRY of MUSIC – Redeemer

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & THE LORD'S PRAYER