

Sermon for Second Sunday After Easter, Year C

John 20: 19-31: "In Defense of Thomas"

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This past Monday, we celebrated my son, Andrew's, 18th birthday. Eighteen is a big milestone for both of us! The week before his birthday, I reflected back on the day that I found out that I was pregnant with Andrew.

For several years, we had tried unsuccessfully to conceive, prior to my pregnancy this pregnancy with Andrew, and I had all but given up. As anyone who has experienced fertility issues knows, this is a painful and even devastating process. Hoping each month for a positive pregnancy result, only to be disappointed again and again and again.

It takes its toll.

There were a couple of times during those several years that I had gone to the doctor thinking for sure that I was pregnant, only to be given the devastating news that I was not.

I distinctly remember the myriad of emotions I felt – sadness, pain, disappointment, and even fear that I might never be able to become pregnant. I could feel my hope ebbing away with each negative test result.

In September of 2000, I went to the doctor because of symptoms of a bladder infection. I had described to a friend the symptoms I was having, and she asked, "Could you be pregnant?" My heart sank as those past moments of disappointment, sadness and pain came flooding back to me. I even felt a bit angry at her for even bringing up the possibility. Why get my hopes up only to have them dashed once again?

At the beginning of my doctor appointment, after doing some tests and waiting for results, the nurse asked me, "Do you think you could be pregnant?" Now even though I knew that this nurse didn't know my history, I couldn't help feeling the urge to tell her not to even bring up the possibility. I simply answered, "No, I'm sure it's a bladder infection."

As I waited alone in the doctor's office for the test results, I could feel that old familiar hope rising up in me again. I remember thinking, "Do I dare hope that this time I really am pregnant?" and then immediately shutting down any thoughts or feelings I had about it. How could I possibly believe that I could be pregnant, and risk devastation once again?

After about 20 minutes, the doctor entered the room and said, "Congratulations, your bladder infection is due in 7 months!" She apparently registered the look of shock on my face because she then said, "Really, I'm not kidding!"

My next response was, "Are you absolutely sure? I've been through this hope before, and I don't know if I can take another disappointment."

Being the kind and compassionate person that she is, she said, “What would it take for you to believe that this is true?” My immediate response was “I don’t think I can really rest in the fact that it’s true unless I see it on an ultrasound.”

Now, I knew that giving an ultrasound wasn’t what was done every single time a pregnancy was suspected. But my doctor, knowing my history, said, “If you need an ultrasound to know that this is true, you’ll get an ultrasound.”

It was when I saw that little being with a heartbeat on the ultrasound that I finally allowed myself to really believe that I was indeed pregnant! Tears of joy streamed down my face, and both the doctor and the ultrasound technician hugged me.

Daring to believe...it can feel risky, can’t it? It can feel so risky that we question whether we can survive finding out that what we believed to be true is maybe somehow not true.

And yet, if we close ourselves off to the risk of believing, if we allow ourselves to marinate in doubt, might we miss out on recognizing that we are receiving a life-changing gift?

Our church’s namesake, Thomas, has gained a reputation (and has been given a bad rap, in my opinion) for being a “doubter.” It’s even become a well-known idiomatic expression to describe someone who is skeptical and refuses to believe without proof a “Doubting Thomas”. We tend to look upon these “doubters” with derision and judgment.

What’s interesting, however, is that the word “doubt” occurs nowhere in vv. 24-29 (contrary to the NIV and the NRSV translations). What is thought to be possibly a more accurate translation of v. 27 reads Jesus as saying, "Do not be unbelieving but believing."¹

Thomas was struggling with unbelief rather than doubt.

Now, pointing out differences between the words “doubt” and “unbelief” might seem like splitting hairs. After all, unbelief implies skepticism, just as doubt does. But in order to doubt, you must already believe that something is potentially true. Unbelief, on the other hand, indicates that there is a refusal to believe.

So, based on a possibly more accurate translation of this passage, Thomas refuses to believe what he cannot see. Thomas does not, however, refuse to believe no matter what. Because Thomas loved Jesus. Thomas had expectations of who Jesus was. Thomas had specific hopes of what the future would look like based on Jesus being the long-expected Messiah.

But then his Messiah was killed in a horrific and humiliating way.

So rather than displaying a stubborn cynicism, maybe Thomas simply felt fear. Fear that his hopes would be dashed, fear of further devastation, fear that everything he believed to be true just...isn’t.

¹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Abingdon Press, 2015. Accessed through: "Ministrymatters™ Bible Reference Resources & Study Tools". *Ministrymatters.Com*, 2019, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/library/#/tnib/e441403e2bb5bcc9911a022a55c4fe2a/john-2024-31-jesusapos-appearance-to-thomas.html>. Accessed 24 Apr 2019.

Because if the resurrection wasn't true, what would this mean for Thomas' life? What would be the point of Christ's sacrifice?

Does Thomas dare hope that Jesus has been resurrected?

That his beloved Christ really lives?

I feel sympathetic toward Thomas in this passage. Who among us hasn't had difficulty believing something? Who among us hasn't wanted proof before we could confidently believe? I'm a prime example of that! When a doctor told me that I was pregnant, I still wanted...no... needed, proof. How could I otherwise survive the risk of hoping and believing?

In addition to Thomas not being any different from any of us, Thomas is also no different than any of the other disciples. After all, none of them initially believed Mary Magdalene when she announced the risen Lord. And upon his resurrection, when Jesus first appeared to the disciples and greeted them with the words, "Peace to you", the disciples didn't yet recognize him until he showed them his hands and side. It was when they saw Jesus that the disciples rejoiced! It was then that they dared to believe.

And yet we tend to be so critical of Thomas! He wasn't even present for Jesus' first appearance to the disciples. I'm sure the disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Christ, but why should Thomas believe someone else's testimony when none of the other disciples believed without seeing? Thomas says to the other disciples, "Until I see the mark of nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (v. 25).

The wonder of this story is that Jesus shows up again, one week later, to give to Thomas what Thomas really needs.² Jesus doesn't say, "Forget Thomas. If he can't believe that I am alive after you disciples have told him so, then he's just a big jerk and not worth my time."

Instead, Jesus understands that there is fear, doubt, pain, and confusion, and that it is Jesus who is the key to unlocking belief, understanding, and joy. Jesus shows up again, especially for Thomas.

Another interesting tidbit about this passage is that it doesn't say that Thomas actually touched Jesus' wounds when Jesus showed up the second time.³

We are simply told in the passage that after Jesus' invitation to touch him, Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and My God!" (v. 28). It is because of Jesus' invitation that Thomas believes, not because Thomas' conditions for believing are met.

As theologian Elisabeth Johnson so aptly explains, the promise of this text is that Jesus isn't stopped by our fears, our uncertainties, our unbelief. Jesus shows up exactly where we are to speak a word of peace, to invite us into belief, and to breathe into us the Holy Spirit.

² Johnson, Elisabeth. "Commentary On John 20:19-31". *Working Preacher*, 2019, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1991. Accessed 24 Apr 2019.

³ Stang, Charles. "Doubting Thomas, Restaged". *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*.

Jesus also speaks a word of blessing to us: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (v. 29).

So, do we dare hope in the resurrection? Thomas’ experience answers us with a resounding, “Yes!” We dare to hope and believe because of the confidence we have in Jesus’ defeat of death through his resurrection.

And as we rest in our confidence of the resurrection, Jesus sends us into the world to speak a word of peace, of comfort, and of hope to others – to share the very good news.

We share the good news because we are confident in the fact that we will ourselves experience resurrection.

We share the good news because we are certain that God keeps God’s promises.

We share the good news because we know that God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes; that death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

We share the good news because we know that our Redeemer lives.

So as we rejoice in the resurrection, let’s share the good news together: Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

(Congregation: Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Amen.

References Studied for this Sermon

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