

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 23, 2017

“Believing in the Word.”

John 20:19-31

I don't know about you, but it already seems to me as if Easter happened about a month ago. Week before last, some of us were here singing songs of lament, washing feet, sitting in front of the Stations of the Cross with lumps in our throats. Then on Sunday, one hundred-fifty plus people passed through this place to hear about the empty tomb.

Then, for most of us, it was back to business as usual: back to chores, the news, the income tax. If last year's figures are any indication, about half of last week's worshipers will show up today. I do not say that in judgment, but as a fact of life. It is hard to sustain the enthusiasm of Easter once Easter is over, once the memory gets further and further away.

No one knew this better than John did. Writing near the end of the first century, he addressed people who had never seen or heard Jesus in the flesh. Most of them had been born after he died, so the stories they heard came second or third-hand. There were still some eyewitnesses around, but even those trusty souls were getting on in years. A child who was six years old on that first Easter morning would have been close to seventy by the time John wrote his Gospel.

John's problem, which is a continuing problem for the church, was how to encourage people in the faith when Jesus was no longer around to be seen or touched. The story of Thomas gave him a way to do that. By detailing that reluctant disciple's doubt, John took the words right of our mouths and put them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do (or do not) come to believe.

Thomas was not there the first time when Jesus appeared to his disciples. He was the only one of the eleven who was not there, which tells us something about his character. Like Peter, he distinguished himself by saying things no one else would say. When Jesus was bent on going to Lazarus' home in Bethany—deep in enemy territory—and everyone else was trying to talk him out of it, Thomas said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” When Jesus sat down at the last supper table and told his friends not to be afraid, because they knew the way where he was going, it was Thomas who said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

He was not an automatic follower. He was a brave and literal-minded maverick who could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after he had convinced himself that it *was* the right thing. Maybe you have known someone like that yourself—someone whose refusal to go along with the crowd has more integrity to it than those who go along easily—even when going along is the right thing to do.

Those who were there that first Easter evening saw the risen Lord. They were so convinced it was him that afterwards they told Thomas he could take their word for it. Jesus was back, still wounded but very much alive. He had forgiven them. He had every right to tell them “Shame on you,” for deserting him, but he had not said that. Instead he said, “Peace be with you.” He had healed them with those words. He had given back their lives again and made them his partners in the sharing of God's grace. “We have seen the Lord,” they told Thomas, in perfect unison, and by all rights his response should have been, “All ten of you saw him at the same time? Well, that's good enough for me. I believe you! What do we do next?”

But that is not what Thomas said. What he said was, “Unless I see...I will not believe,” which makes Thomas a stand-in for all of us who want to see something for ourselves before we decide if it's true or not. I, for instance, have heard some pretty convincing stories about UFO's in my life, but until I see

one for myself I will remain a skeptic. Until I do, they remain hearsay to me. I'm not saying they are not true. I am saying I do not know them to be true for myself. Unless I see, I will not believe.

It's an understandable attitude. John understood it. Why else would he have told us about Thomas? Even Jesus understood it. In one of his more generous moves, he did not dismiss Thomas from his circle of friends for failing to trust what the others had told him. On the contrary, Jesus made sure Thomas was included in that circle by coming back and repeating the whole scene a second time for his benefit alone. In the end, no one who was there that night had to take anyone's word for anything. They all saw for themselves, and believed.

That would seem to leave us out—all of us who were not there, who will never lay eyes or hands on the person of Jesus Christ. We are outside the circle of this story by thousands of years and yet Jesus means to include us in it, too. Speaking over Thomas' shoulder to the rest of us, he says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Us, in other words. Those of us who have never seen him in the flesh, who have only the testimony of others to rely on—people who were there and who, though they are long dead, still beg us to take their word for what they are sure they saw. They knew they were privileged. They also knew that it was up to them to keep the stories alive somehow, so their children and their children's children could participate in the wonders they themselves had witnessed.

We can thank God they did not do that by reducing Jesus' life to five short easy-to-remember slogans and pickling them for all eternity. Instead, they collected all the stories they could remember about him. They wrote them down with all the power still in them, so that when they read them out loud to each other they could feel their hearts beat faster. They left plenty of the stories intact, even when they found them puzzling or troubling or downright offensive, because they knew those were the ones that stood the best chance of staying alive.

If you are a lover of stories, then you know this is true. A good story does not just tell you about something that happened once upon a time. It brings that time back to life so that you can walk around in it and experience it for yourself. That is the power of the word, and when the word concerns Jesus, that power becomes God's power.

Scripture is the message our ancestors rolled up and put it in a bottle for us, because they wanted us to experience the person of Jesus—if not in the flesh, then in the word. Reading what they preserved for us all those years ago, we are free to believe or not. We are free to believe *them* or not, but one thing in this morning's story tells us that seeing is not superior to hearing.

One can trust either sense. And millions have discovered Jesus not in the flesh, but in the stories, which have a way of jumping off the page. They are more than history. Jesus is still alive in them, with power to make us weep, rejoice, hope, act. Maybe that is why we call both him and the stories about him the *living* word of God. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Can we really do that? No.

Can the story make us feel as if we can? Yes. If we open ourselves up to it. If we believe, because believing is all the Holy Spirit needs to bring the story to life. Or to put it this way, believing is all the Holy Spirit needs to bring us to life, breathing on us the same way Jesus breathed on his disciples.

The story is already alive, with or without us. God wants us to be part of it—to shout Alleluia on Palm Sunday, to wash feet on Maundy Thursday, to weep on Good Friday, to laugh out loud on Easter Sunday—in these and a thousand other ways, to be part of Jesus Christ's risen life on earth—so that the brave, fragile testimony goes on being heard: "We have seen the Lord!" In the flesh? No. In the story? Possibly. In our life together? Absolutely.