

SHOW ME

A sermon for Easter 2b - April 11, 2021

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

John 20:19-31 - Julian Gordy

Ignatius Loyola, a leader of the Counter Reformation and founder of the Jesuit Order taught that, in reading scripture, we should try to put ourselves in the story. It is a helpful practice, and in today's gospel reading, it isn't hard to do. It is easy to identify with the disciples huddled together in a locked room.

I think I know how these people felt. It reminds me of the atmosphere at my grandmother's house in the early evening after my grandfather's funeral, when most of the guests and extended family had gone, and only a few close friends and the immediate family were left there in the still sadness of twilight, supporting one another and beginning to recognize what Granddaddy's absence meant to each of us, as we felt that dead place in our hearts that had once been him.

Add to that feeling in this story the fear that has overtaken these followers of the now dead Messiah. They are afraid that, now that the authorities have done away with their leader, they will be next. They must have really needed to hear Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you!"

And I can identify with Thomas here as well. Thomas knew that dead people do not come back to life. And while he certainly must have *wanted* to believe his friends' wild story, he admitted his doubts: "Unless I see. . . I will not believe."

“Show me!” That’s Thomas. That’s me. That’s exactly how I would have reacted to other people’s telling me, “We have seen the Lord,” whom I know to have been dead and buried. Like the unofficial Missouri state motto, I’d have said, “Show me!”

Of all the courses I took in high school, college, and seminary, the most useful - other than a high school elective in typing - was a course in the scientific method. In that class I learned that “proof” is a concept that applies only to mathematics and symbolic logic. For everything else, there is evidence - sometimes overwhelming evidence, but only evidence to be evaluated, never indisputable proof.

Since taking that course, I will confess to being more than a little skeptical about most things. And given the state of the world in which scamming the elderly and everybody else is a multibillion-dollar industry, in which conspiracy theories seem to get more traction in some places than good science, in which we’ve all been taken in by too much small print in too many contracts, and in which advertising everything from cars to deodorant promises more than anything but heaven can deliver, there is wisdom in being a skeptic. I’m with Thomas, “Show me!”

I think that I am in good company as a skeptic. The French mathematician and philosopher Rene Descartes famously said, “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.”

We are church people, of course, and our very faith is centered on the proclamation: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Still, many of us are like Thomas: we would appreciate a little hard evidence.

I know this because whenever there is a report that science or archaeology has found something that gives evidence to the veracity of some biblical story or other, people get excited. “Hey! They found the ark!” someone will write me an email. And we think, “Maybe there is scientific proof to my faith after all!”

But ***science and reason will never prove the resurrection***. Just look at the gospels. None of them have an actual account of the resurrection. There is just an empty tomb - an empty tomb and, later, the testimony of those who encountered the risen Lord. That’s it. Our belief in the resurrection comes from two places.

A friend told me that her spiritual director gave her homework after her first session. He asked her, “Come back next week and tell me why you are a Christian.” What if somebody asked you that? Most of us, if we are honest, would start with something to the effect that it is because we were raised by Christians. And if you examine what that means, all of us are Christians, at least in part, because of the testimony of others. We are **TOLD** people. Mary Magdalene and the other early disciples encountered the risen Lord. They told others who told others who told others who told others until, now, hundreds of years later, **we** are told.

Witnesses serve a vital function in faith. You can see that in today’s gospel lesson. Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus first appeared. The other disciples told him. And what did he do? He doubted, but he hung in there with the community until he had himself encountered the risen Jesus.

Former Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, George Anderson was the president of LTSS when I first went to seminary. His wife Sunny died of brain cancer

in 1982. In a rare bit of honesty that we don't encounter often enough among religious leaders, Bishop Anderson admits that, when that happened, he lost his ability to believe or to pray or to praise. He says that, during that time, he went to church and couldn't even sing the hymns. But, he says, others sang. Others prayed. Others said the Creed and proclaimed the resurrection gospel. And the faith of those others stood in for him until he was able to believe again.

And that points us to the most profound evidence we have of the resurrection - the presence of the Risen One in the community that bears his name.

In the gospel lesson Thomas demands proof of the resurrected Jesus. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." But when Jesus shows up the second time and Thomas is there, Pastor Peter Marty points out, "He gets so overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus that he ends up shelving the autopsy and dispensing with the idea of poking his finger into Jesus' flesh." Thomas demands proof, he gets presence.¹

You see, it is the presence of Jesus among us that is the best evidence that he lives. Jesus' resurrection is not just a dogma to be recited in the Creed or believed in a litmus test of orthodoxy. Rather it is the beginning of a new life for us as God's people. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says, "The scriptures tell us that after his death [Jesus] entered into an entirely new form of existence - a resurrected, glorified bodily existence - one in which he shared in the power of God and shared that power with the church. In the New Testament, Jesus' death and resurrection are united with his ascension and with his sending the Holy Spirit to his followers. The

¹Peter W. Marty, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *The Christian Century*. March 24, 2021.

sharing in Jesus' new life through the power of the Holy Spirit is the **real evidence** of his resurrection."²

In other words, not only do we have the empty tomb and what we have been told by witnesses to the risen Christ, ***we also have in our midst the Spirit of Jesus***. Like those first disciples, we too encounter the risen Lord here in bread and wine, out there in our neighbors who need us, in this community of followers gathered in *this* room with our own fears and doubts.

We encounter Jesus alive and with power to resurrect our lives, to make us new, to transform our doubts and our suffering and our loss, to transform our community as his spirit transformed the early followers of Jesus described in the lesson from Acts, until they were "of one heart and soul, and [there was] not a needy person among them." Then others will encounter the Risen One in us!

Show me. Show me the risen Lord. There is no proof of his resurrection. But there is evidence here among us - here in this community in whom the Spirit is pleased to dwell. Amen.

²Luke Timothy Johnson. *The Real Jesus*. HarperCollins.