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Second Sunday of Easter, John 20.19-31

“My Lord & my God!”

“Jesus said to Thomas, ‘...Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”¹

For centuries, doubting Thomas has been the epitome of how not to respond to a faith encounter. The term *doubting Thomas* has even entered our language. Merriam-Webster describes a *doubting Thomas* as “someone who rarely trusts or believes things before having proof: a doubtful or skeptical person.”²

But by doing this – automatically associating Thomas with skepticism – we risk missing Thomas response to Jesus’ invitation. Thomas proclaims Jesus as ‘My Lord, and my God!’ In the second to last chapter of the gospel, Thomas is the first person to name the words in the gospel’s prologue, that the Word was God³ and that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us⁴ in the person of Jesus Christ.

‘My Lord, and my God!’

Thomas is the theologian of the group. After his little outburst of unbelief, he quickly reestablishes his credentials in acknowledging Jesus as God.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. This dialog is at the end of today’s gospel passage. We need to return to the beginning...

¹ John 20.27-28 NRSV translation (as with all proceeding scripture citations, unless otherwise stated)

² Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doubting%20Thomas>

³ John 1.1

⁴ John 1.14

“It was evening on that day, the first day of the week.”⁵

Every word in the gospel of John is precisely placed. There are no filler phrases – everything means something.

It was evening – the time of day when light begins to fade. Throughout John’s gospel, there is repetitive imagery of light and dark – Jesus said “I am the light of the world”⁶ – a beacon of God’s goodness in a dark world; Nicodemus comes to Jesus ‘by night’⁷ – indicating that he is not yet sure about Jesus, that he’s still in the dark.

But for now in our story, it is evening for the disciples - the light is fading. Perhaps the early signs of hope following Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Jesus⁸ are beginning to wane, like the setting sun. Was it real? Why would Jesus appear only to Mary?

I’m quite sure it wasn’t just Thomas who questioned what exactly this small group were experiencing.

“The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.”⁹

Can you imagine how much confusion and fear there must have been after Jesus was arrested and killed? As we observed in Holy Week, Jesus was betrayed and arrested on Thursday, was crucified on Good Friday and – in this passage of John’s gospel at least – we are still in the evening of the first Easter Sunday. Only Mary Magdalene has seen the risen Lord, and nobody is satisfied with a single testimony, particularly from a woman. John’s gospel tells us repeatedly that Jesus had attempted to prepare his disciples for his death, but they just didn’t get it. Even as late as this Easter day, when Peter and the other disciple reached the empty tomb, John’s gospel tells us that, “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”¹⁰ They did not comprehend the resurrection. They also didn’t know if the Jewish authorities were satisfied with just getting rid of Jesus, or if this was the beginning of a persecution of his followers. Their fear was genuine.

⁵ John 20.19

⁶ John 8.12

⁷ John 3.2

⁸ John 20.11-18

⁹ John 20.19

¹⁰ John 20.9

In this locked room, in fervent prayer the disciples cry out to God; they cry out over the death of Jesus – but as yet they cannot make the connection that Jesus has conquered death, that Jesus *is* God: “My Lord, and my God.”

“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”¹¹

With these words of peace Jesus fulfilled the promise he had made to his disciples at the Last Supper: “Peace I leave with you” he had said, “my peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.”¹² Jesus had promised them peace, a peace which stems from an abundance of love for his friends – that perfect love which casts out fear.¹³

“The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”¹⁴

In the shock, the joy, the utter amazement at Jesus’ resurrection, no words of the disciples are recorded. They most surely praised God for this miraculous sign before them, but what can they say directly to Jesus? I wonder if they can even look him in the eye – John’s gospel doesn’t mention the disciples fleeing after Jesus’ arrest, in the way portrayed in Matthew’s gospel¹⁵, but Peter’s denial is there, and only ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ is listed as being present with the women at the foot of the cross.¹⁶ Where were the others? What can they say to Jesus, really? And where is Thomas – he would know what to say: “My Lord, and my God.”

“He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”¹⁷

Just as in the beginning, God breathed the breath of life into the first man, Adam;¹⁸ just as in Ezekiel’s vision, the Lord breathed life into Israel in the valley of dry bones,¹⁹ so too Jesus breathes the

¹¹ John 20.19

¹² John 14.27 NIV

¹³ 1John 14.8

¹⁴ John 20.20

¹⁵ Matt 26.56

¹⁶ John 19.26

¹⁷ John 20.22

¹⁸ Gen 2.7

¹⁹ Ezek 37.5

breath of life into his disciples. Receiving that breath was the conclusion of their baptism. John the Baptist had indicated that while he baptized with water, there would be one greater than him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.²⁰ With that breath Jesus forged the gathered disciples into a community, with the Holy Spirit as its guide. He would leave, but the Advocate would remain with them – with us – forever.²¹

[Thomas] said to them, “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.”²²

Thomas declared that he would not be satisfied until he had both seen and touched Jesus, as if one sense alone would not be enough to confirm the resurrection.

Although the word of the other disciples is insufficient for Thomas, Jesus shows kindness in his response. Other demands for signs earlier in the gospel were met with scorn²³, but Jesus is sympathetic to Thomas. Why the difference? Because those who demanded signs in his earlier ministry did so out of disbelief. Thomas wanted desperately to believe. His desire to touch as well as see stemmed from his desperate yearning for the resurrection to be true. It’s the biblical version of pinching ourselves because we can’t believe our eyes – of needing that additional stimulus.

One week later, the story picks up again. Thomas is present now. Why did Jesus need to reappear? Does Jesus have something more to communicate to us? He challenges Thomas to touch him, but then encourages his faith. What we traditionally render as ‘do not doubt but believe’ is perhaps more accurately translated, ‘do not, not believe but believe’[x2], or in other words, ‘Thomas, it’s ok. I am really here. It is right to believe in me.’

To which Thomas makes his true confession: “My Lord, and my God!”

²⁰ John 1.33

²¹ John 14.16

²² John 20.25

²³ Consider John 2.18, 4.48 & 6.26

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”²⁴

Jesus does have something more to communicate – to those outside the immediate story. The gospel is careful not to make a distinction for the early Christians – to create a divide between those who saw Jesus – during his earthly ministry or after his resurrection – and those who did not. There is no second-class Christian. All have equal access to the Father through the risen Christ. Hear the comforting words we read today from First Peter to the Christian community: “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”²⁵

Brothers and sisters this is great news for you and I. True belief is not based upon signs or wonders. We see Christ – in each other, in the worlds around us.

Last week the Dean of my Seminary²⁶ reminded us of one of the many paradoxes in the Christian life: to believe, we have to see; but to truly see, we must believe; to see Jesus, we have to believe in him; but to believe in Jesus, we need to be able to see him in the people around us. Having faith helps us to see, but it is in having sight that we receive faith.

Fortunately, it is God who initiates the sight; God who encourages our faith. But to receive that we must want to believe, just as Thomas did. Do not not believe, but believe!

Jesus breathed on the disciples in that house where the disciples were gathered on the first Easter Sunday, and in so doing completing their baptism. We – you and I – are a people baptized by water and the Spirit. One week ago, on Easter Day, we renewed our baptismal vows and recommitted to living out our Christian life together. We remembered our baptisms, the day Christ breathed the breath of life into us.

For the gift of life that you have given us, we can only cry out, “My Lord and my God!” Amen.

²⁴ John 20.29

²⁵ 1Peter 1.8

²⁶ Rev. Dr. Cynthia Briggs-Kitteredg included this point in a homily given April 18th, 2017 in Christ Chapel, Seminary of the Southwest.