

John 20:19-31s

The day before I began working on this passage about Doubting Thomas, I had a conversation with one of my Intro to Bible students, a man older than I am who's taking the class for fun. He wanted to know how I thought about faith after getting under the hood of the texts—that is, once we'd learned about all the ways in which the writers of our sacred texts were poorly informed or flawed, how could I still find the texts authoritative or revelatory? It's a question most of my students aren't ready to ask, so I appreciated the conversation. And then I opened up the story of Doubting Thomas, and it really just continues the conversation.

Thomas has shown up before in John's gospel. He spoke up as Jesus was on his way to Lazarus, who had just died. Remember that in John, the reason Jesus is executed is that he raises Lazarus, demonstrating that the empire's power to wield death is subordinate to his power to bring life. Jesus is headed to Bethany, where he intends to raise Lazarus, and Thomas says to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." So at this point Thomas has *not* seen Jesus' ability to overcome death, but he is so committed to Jesus that he's willing to die with him.

Thomas speaks up again during Jesus' Farewell Discourse, when Jesus is saying that he's going to his Father's house to prepare a place for them, and Thomas asks, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus' response is that he *is* the Way, and they not only know him (the Way) but by knowing him they know the Father. In other words, to be in relationship with Jesus is to be in relationship with God. But the word "Way" also implies action: you *go* on a way, you *do* things in a certain way. If Jesus *is* the Way, what do we do or where do we go? The answer comes from observing Jesus who, in John, went

down. He descended from heaven and became incarnate to have relationships with human beings. He washed his disciples' feet and told them to be servants. He left them with instructions to love one another as he had loved them. All of this adds up to the Way of Jesus: put your feet on the ground, serve others, love others. That's how you get to the Father—by enacting Jesus' Way in your own life.

Those are the things we learn from Thomas: first, that he is brave enough to face death with Jesus before he knows Jesus has more power than death has; and second, that the Way of Jesus that they all intend to follow is feet on the ground and hands outstretched to others. Now in today's reading we learn that Jesus had appeared to all the disciples except Thomas, who was apparently out doing stuff. They're locked in the house for fear of the religious authorities, and Jesus appears to them and says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has *sent* me, so I *send* you." He'd descended from heaven, put his feet on the ground, and served others; now he's sending them on that Way. And he breathes on them, filling them with the Holy Spirit as God had breathed Spirit into Adam in Genesis 2—John's version of Pentecost. Jesus is commissioning the disciples. He even tells them, "Receive the Holy Spirit . . . if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven," etc. This is a little worrisome, because not all the disciples of Christ have always been inclined toward forgiveness. But again, in John's framework, sin is not wrongdoing but fracture of relationship. Jesus was sent to mend relationship with God and people, and now he's sending the disciples to do the same. If they don't do it, it won't get done. Could the call to action be any clearer?

Well, apparently it wasn't clear enough, because a week later when Thomas *is* among them, the disciples are still in the house. Now I begin to see why Thomas doubted. He didn't

doubt Jesus; he doubted the disciples. If Jesus had really been there and breathed the Holy Spirit into them, wouldn't they all have sprung into action? There are people out there who need some love! We don't know what Thomas was doing the first time Jesus had appeared, but he certainly wasn't locked in the house for fear of the religious authorities. He's a brave guy.

But here's the thing. Sad sacks though the disciples may be, they are there for each other. They're there for Thomas, and he for them, even if he doesn't believe their crazy story. They are hanging together in their uncertainty or fear or cluelessness, whatever it is, and however uncomfortable the week may have been with Thomas not able to buy the story they tell, they at least are in relationship with each other.

A Lutheran pastor, Janet Hunt, saw on her Facebook feed that a young friend far away was in distress of an unidentified variety. An older friend suggested that the young woman might find some support and comfort in her old church. The young woman politely thanked her but said that since she no longer believed, it felt wrong—maybe fraudulent—to show up there just because she was in need. Janet Hunt writes that her heart hurt for this woman, and not just because she professed a lack of belief, but because she felt compelled to cut herself off from a potential source of comfort. Faith ebbs and flows, and nobody can be argued into it or out of it—but human fellowship is the seeds of the kingdom. When you know in your bones that resurrection is how the universe works, you should go to church, and when you can't think of anything hopeful to say that doesn't sound hollow and fake, you should go to church. Church is, or at least aspires to be, people on the Way, feet on the ground, arms outstretched to others. It shouldn't matter whether you find yourself able to trust or believe in God.

That's the charge with which John leaves us. Thomas' question about how to follow Jesus to where he is going is answered. Following Jesus leads not just to death, but beyond—beyond what could be asked or imagined. Following Jesus leads not just to seeing him, but to knowing him through the community of disciples who are on his Way. Jesus tells Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," which is us, and then John breaks the fourth wall and comments directly to us, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." What John's doing there is connecting us to the disciples who *had* seen, connecting us through time to the great cloud of witnesses in whose fellowship we stand just as much as we stand in fellowship with disciples here and now.

I don't say it out loud because it's not the place, but when I see my older student turning around and shaking hands with the Ethiopian immigrant student at the desk behind him, getting acquainted and later asking after his mother, I see Jesus' Way incarnated under fluorescent lights. When my Ethiopian student tells me that he goes to St. Ambrose Cathedral because people from all over the world worship there, I see that the Holy Spirit is breathing into that congregation. The risen Christ and the Holy Spirit can seem like airy-fairy, churchy concepts, abstract and highly spiritual. But they are about very real things. A New Hampshire woman in her nineties, asked what she'd learned of importance in her life, told this story: She and a group of friends had decided one afternoon to climb Mount Washington in New Hampshire. Before they were able to descend, a late afternoon fog rolled in and enveloped them all in its thick, obscuring whiteness. They couldn't see the way ahead, and so they agreed

they would move down the mountain very slowly, inch by inch. And they agreed they would all hold hands and they would not, under any circumstances, let go of each other. Remembering the event years later, the woman said of this experience: "Sometimes all I could see was the hand ahead of me and the one behind me. Sometimes my arms ached so badly I thought I would cry out loud, but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another."¹

The Way of Jesus is, feet on the ground, hands outstretched to one another. In that posture, we come to eternal life.

God of resurrection,

Your son, Jesus, awed his followers by appearing among them. With awe we also celebrate his resurrection and rejoice in eternal life. Amen.

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003b83/parked_beliefs