

From Honest Doubting To Faithful Living

John 20: 19-31

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You'd think by the first evening of the resurrection the disciples would be relieved and happy. They already heard from Mary Magdalene about Jesus being raised from the dead but they still doubted. After all, they thought, women can become so emotional and stressed out they start hearing and seeing things that really aren't there. But just to make sure, Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves. The tomb was empty. Even so, on that first evening the disciples were still stuck in Good Friday. Hidden behind the bolted door of the Upper Room, they were afraid of hearing the inevitable knock on the door leading to their arrest, imprisonment and possible execution.

In this heavy atmosphere of fear and doubt, Jesus appeared with the greeting, "Peace be with you."

"Peace be with you." Jesus was being kind. He could've said, "Why did you desert me?" or, "Why didn't you believe Mary?" or "Why are you still hiding?" Instead Jesus was gracious.

"Peace be with you."

Three days earlier in that same room, just hours before his crucifixion, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives it, I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and neither them be afraid. (John 14: 27)

"Peace," in geopolitics, means the absence of violence and strife. That's not what Jesus offers. His peace is not of this world and passes human understanding. The peace Jesus gives makes for the highest good. The world maintains peace by avoiding or ignoring trouble. Jesus' peace helps us face trouble with strength, conviction and even joy. That same brand of peace empowered Jesus to endure his Good Friday and enables us to face our Good Fridays.

Remember, we are God's Easter people, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God. Christ defeated sin and death the moment he stepped out of that tomb.

For many, it sounds too good to be true. That's why we know people of good will doubting the Easter story, which was "written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God and after believing in him you may have life in his name." (John 20; 30-31)

This is true: even the most faithful Christian experiences doubts and fears when everything's going wrong. Even the disciples, who were alive when Jesus was raised up, weren't much better off than we are at accepting Christ's new and expanding reality.

For that reason, Jesus breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." He knows we can't live the full abundant life on our own. We need outside help, the totality of God, the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, to give us real and lasting peace. Isn't that why Jesus came to earth in the first place? Through Christ's resurrection, we're raised up to enter into that mysterious relationship of perfect peace and love shared by the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit.

We know that John wrote his gospel fully aware of the creation story in Genesis. The opening words of his gospel begin with, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... the wind (or the Spirit of God) brooded over the face of the deep." That same Spirit breathed life into Adam. Now that same spirit was breathing new life into the disciples so they became the first generation of Easter people who go out to change the world.

So it wasn't just seeing The Risen Christ that transformed those terrified disciples into purpose driven apostles. It was the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, breathing into them the power to bring the peace of Christ to a world in turmoil. The old hymn "Breathe on Me Breath of God" expresses this beautifully.

*Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life a-new,
That I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*

So, it wasn't just knowing about the resurrection, it was the Holy Spirit enabling them to believe in the resurrection.

Unfortunately for Thomas, one of the disciples, he wasn't there. Because of his absence, today he's known as Doubting Thomas. Later, after Jesus left, Thomas showed up. The others told him they saw Jesus but Thomas didn't believe them. That's when he famously declared he wouldn't believe until he touched Jesus wounds with his own two hands.

You and I wouldn't want to be remembered because of one thing we said we later regret. So let's not be too hard on Thomas. In similar situations all of us express the same doubts.

Poor Thomas was still stuck in Good Friday. It wasn't his fault he wasn't there and just because somebody tells you something doesn't necessarily mean it's true. Sometimes you need to see for yourself before you believe.

That explains why Jesus came back when all of them, including Thomas, we're together again. Then Thomas could experience the resurrection for himself. When he saw Jesus, his doubts dissipated and he fell on his knees saying, "My Lord and my God."

They say seeing isn't believing, believing is seeing. That's why Jesus said, "blessed are those who have not seen them yet have come to believe."

That last beatitude is meant for us. Unlike Mary, Peter John and Thomas we haven't seen the risen Christ with our own two eyes but we are blessed with the same capacity to believe.

Thankfully, God also gives us the freedom to doubt. There will always be people of good will who take Jesus seriously enough to join the struggle between faith and doubt but can't break through. I remember having a series of heavy conversations with a man who was terminally ill. He wanted to believe in God but he couldn't connect the dots.

"Is your pride getting in the way?" I finally asked. "Are you resisting because that would mean giving up control of your life and then submitting to God's authority?"

"I thought about that," he replied. "I don't think it's pride. I just don't have it in me to believe."

I believe God loved and respected this honest doubter. He wasn't playing games. He was on a fierce search for the truth. Maybe he couldn't believe but he always tried to live his life as if he could.

On the other hand, you have people who half heartedly ask, "Can't I be a good person and not believe in God?" For them, that settles the matter. They can't be bothered seeking the answer to their own question because if they followed through, they might be obligated to bow down and confess, as Thomas did, "My Lord and My God."

Even if you do believe in God and Christ's resurrection you still have to answer the question, "What does it all have to do with me and the way I live my life?" Its tempting to think, "I'm saved" and then go your merry way. Take another look at what Thomas said when he fell at the Risen Christ's feet. He said, "my Lord and my God." By addressing Jesus as "my Lord," he recognized Jesus not just as his teacher and friend but as the ultimate authority over his life. Thomas was not in charge of himself any more, he was submitting his life to Christ from then on.

Although there's no biblical record of the way the twelve apostles died, tradition tells us all but one, John the beloved disciple, died a martyr's death. They say the doubting Thomas was hacked in two by a sword because he refused to renounce Christ as his Lord. Even though the four Gospels often portrayed the disciples in an unfavorable light, especially on Good Friday, they finally got it right. Having experienced the resurrection and being empowered by the Holy Spirit, they gave the rest of their lives to Christ and his gospel.

This post Easter story of the doubting Thomas is meant to comfort us. Like Thomas, we have our doubts, maybe not in God but in ourselves. We become doubtful when we weigh the responsibilities of Christian discipleship. We struggle with our fears and abilities whenever called upon to do something important. We wonder if the kingdom of God is near when we

look around and see the world coming apart at the seams. We resist when we hear that voice from above encouraging us to set aside our fears and become part of the solution.

Jesus never said following him would be easy. On the contrary he promised it would be hard. He also promised this: if you're willing to lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, you'll find it. In a nutshell, that's the struggle we face, losing what you want but gaining everything you need to live the the life God planned for you from the beginning.

Never forget, resurrection isn't just for the dead, it's also for the living. Every day God raises us up as he raised his son up on Easter morning.

Believe the Good News. Allow your doubts to give way to faith. Trust the Lord with everything you have and everything you are. Let Jesus lift you into that intimate and loving relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and then, having experienced God's love, go out and love your neighbor as yourself. And always remember, even when you're in doubt, "He is risen, he is risen indeed!"