4-7/8-18 Rev. Amy Haines

John 20:19-31 Witnesses to the Resurrection Easter Season

How do you know that a man has walked on the moon? Were you in the spacecraft with him? How do you know that the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up upon takeoff? Were you in Florida watching it with your own eyes? How do you know that the International Space Station is floating above us even as we worship? Can you always see its streak in the sky?

There are many things in life that we know…because someone else has told us so.

I know that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon…because my parents watched it live on a television broadcast. I know that the Challenger exploded in mid-air… because my classmates watched it live in Reading Class on a television broadcast. My sister Jen once saw the streak in the sky that is the International Space Station, but someone else had to explain to her that the streak she saw from her backyard was not from a comet or an airplane, but from inhabitants in orbit.

There are many things in life that we know…because someone else has told us so.

Incredibly, however, there are still men and women in our world today who do not believe we have ever been on the moon, believing that NASA conspired with the government to make it look real in a warehouse on a back lot somewhere. There are still men and women in our world today who do not believe the Holocaust killed so many Jews.

No matter how much we learn from others on space travel to world history to the intricacies of physics, there will always be some doubters in the crowd who will believe in nothing they cannot see or hear or experience on their own.

..There was once a smart young college student who announced to a group of friends one day that he would believe nothing that he could not understand. Another student, who lived on a nearby farm turned to him and said:

"As I was driving into campus today, I passed a field in which some sheep were grazing. Do you believe it?" "Sure" replied first student.

"Not far from the sheep", the second student said, "some calves were browsing. Do you believe it?" "Yes" the first student replied.

"And not too far down the road a gaggle of geese were feeding. Do you believe it?" the second student said. "I guess so" said the first student.

"Well", said the second student, "the grass that the sheep ate will turn into wool; the grass that the calves ate will turn into hair, and the grass that geese ate will turn into feathers. Do you believe this?" "Ummm, .. yes, I do." the first student said.

"But do you understand it?" "Not really" the first student said, somewhat puzzled.

"You know", declared the second student, "If you live long enough, you will find that there are a great many things that you will believe without understanding."

--Richard Fairchild rockies.net

I believe in electricity and heart surgery without understanding the intricacies of how they work. I believe in hope and love without understanding fully how they impact our lives. There is much in life that we believe without fully understanding.

This is true in our world history as well as in our faith history.

Abraham stepped out in faith, becoming a nomad on his way to the Promised Land, without understanding how God would provide descendants more numerous than the sands. Mary and Joseph agreed to raise the Son of God without understanding how she became pregnant by the Spirit of God. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the other disciples of Jesus believed in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, without understanding how Jesus escaped his tomb and the tomb of death.

You and I are here this morning, because we trusted in the witness of another about the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. None of us were present on that first Easter morning when God rolled away the stone and raised Jesus from the dead. None of us actually saw resurrection with our own eyes. So we are here this morning because someone else --a pastor, a friend, a parent, the Word of God---someone else has told us the good news of a risen Savior.

We are here this morning because we believe, or at least yearn to believe, what we have been told, what we have read, what we have experienced of the peace of Christ present in our lives.

We may not always understand God’s ways, yet we can trust that God is with us. We may not always understand the direction God calls us to take, yet we can believe that God has a reason for that direction. We may not understand all of Scripture, yet we can still believe it proclaims for us a God of love, hope, forgiveness, and new life.

No one saw the resurrection of Jesus. No one was present at the moment Jesus was raised from the tomb. Yet--the resurrection still changed the lives of Jesus’ followers forever. They became witnesses to that mind boggling moment, even though they were not present at that moment. They became witnesses to what that moment meant for their faith, for their lives, and for the world. And their witness has changed the world forever!

Last weekend we celebrated the wondrous good news, Jesus is risen from the dead!

Yet remember on that first Easter that the disciples were not suddenly overjoyed by such good news as the empty tomb. Rather, they struggled to make sense of it all.

On that first Easter evening, even after the women had witnessed to the resurrection, even after the first disciples had been to the tomb and seen it empty, the disciples huddled together behind locked doors, struggling to believe. Fear mingled with hope was the reality of that first Easter day.

Then suddenly, behind those locked doors, Jesus appeared among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Peace be with you…in the midst of the storms and struggles of life,

know that God is there.

Peace be with you…even though you deserted and denied me,

I still love you and forgive you.

Peace be with you…you may not be perfect,

but I still invite you to follow me and be my disciples in this world.

Peace be with you…

Notice that Jesus does not condemn nor shame nor speak words of disappointment to his disciples. Rather, he speaks words of acceptance, of forgiveness, of hope. Peace be with you…

Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his side, bearing the marks of the nails and the spear. Jesus forgave them then blessed them then commissioned them to be his witnesses. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

What was offered to the women was now offered to the disciples—first-hand experience of the risen Christ! Now the disciples, as well as the women, had incredible, mind-boggling, life-changing news to share, “We have seen the Lord! Jesus is alive! He has risen from the dead!”

This was incredible good news for those present on that Easter evening. Yet for those who were not there, they continued to struggle, to believe such mind-boggling news. A risen Jesus? How can that be possible?

Thomas, often called the Twin, one of the original inner circle of twelve disciples, he is recorded in the Scriptures as one such doubter of such incredible news. For some reason on that first Easter Thomas was not with the other disciples behind their locked doors quivering in fear. Where he was we do not know, nor does it really matter.

What matters is when Thomas returned and heard that Jesus had truly appeared to the disciples, and the news of resurrection that the women had proclaimed was true, Thomas struggled to believe. Hence the nickname, “Doubting Thomas.”

Thomas could not, would not, believe their incredible news. Yet I think Thomas’ nickname is a bad rap. Thomas was more of a realist than a doubter, and needed evidence of resurrection. He needed more than their words and emotions. He wanted to touch Jesus’ scars, to experience the truth firsthand, in order to believe.

Nowadays we live in a society where any news, good or bad, is taken with a grain of salt, approached with a skeptical attitude, and rejected until proven true. Nowadays we live in a world of fake news, conspiracy theories, and exaggerated stories in order to claim 15 minutes of fame

How do you react to mind-boggling, life-altering news, good or bad? Do you accept it, reject it, or strive to find out more about it before giving a final verdict? My hunch is most of us want more before we can accept or reject life-changing news. We want a second opinion. We want to hear it from another source. We want to verify its truth. So in many ways, we are much like Thomas.

And that is how the Gospel of John wants us to be.

Thomas was a realist and doubter, and also a believer who surrendered fully to his convictions and beliefs. Thankfully he was allowed to remain among the disciples even with his doubts, and he never gave up hope that what the others said was true.

When one week later Jesus appeared again among the disciples and proclaimed, “Peace be with you,” Thomas was present. Jesus offered Thomas the scars of his hands and side. And Thomas moved from doubt to belief, from fear to faith. He proclaimed the greatest confession found in the Gospel of John, “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas didn’t respond to Jesus with more doubt or questions. We do not know if he even reached out his hands to touch the nail marks or Jesus’ side. What we do know is in one moment, in the presence of a crucified and risen Savior, Thomas was transformed from doubt to faith and responded in worship and praise, “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas’ confession is followed once more not by rebuke but by blessing—and Jesus’ blessing to Thomas can reach out to even all of us worshipping together this day. Jesus proclaims, in response to Thomas’ faith, “Blessed are those who have not seen [me] and yet have come to believe.”

Blessed are we here this morning because we are willing to believe the witnesses who have gone before us, proclaiming the good news of resurrection. We believe the Gospel writers. We believe Peter and Paul. We believe generations of faithful men and women who have committed their lives to show us through word and deed, love and sacrifice what a difference it makes in life to follow a risen Lord and Savior.

Blessed are we here this morning because we are willing to believe in the good news witnessed to us, believing that God’s resurrection power and truth has the power and truth to change our lives.

Believing in such good news does not mean that we have it all together. Believing in such good news does not mean that our lives will be free from struggle. Believing in such good news does not mean that we will never doubt.

Believing in such good news does mean that even when we don’t understand this thing we call faith, we are still willing to believe, willing to trust, willing to follow where Jesus leads us.

Pope John Paul II, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church who died in 2005 and was canonized in 2014, he knew firsthand the transforming power and truth of Jesus’ resurrection. You may not agree with everything he believed, you may not agree with all of the Catholic Church doctrines, but hopefully you can agree that his story is a story of faith and trust in a God of resurrection.

Imagine standing firm in your faith in the midst of Nazism. Imagine standing firm in your faith in the midst of Communism. Pope John Paul II saw despair and destruction and atheism all around him in his younger years, yet he still stood firm in faith. Those seeds of faith took root and blossomed. This man lost his mother at age 9, his brother at age 12 and his father before he could become a priest. He had to study and hide away in secret, away from the Nazi leaders in Poland who sought to kill all priests.

He spoke out against communism from his own experience of serving as a priest in communist Poland. His health was not the best in his final years, and he was almost killed by an assassin’s bullet, but even his ailments could not stop him from living for Jesus.

Pope John Paul II could have become stuck in suffering and despaired his lot in this world but instead he lived as a man of the cross and empty tomb, working to share resurrection joy with others. He was a champion for the oppressed and encouraged real faith in children and youth. He continued to travel and preach and be among the people even after the attempt on his life and even when he struggled to stand, speak or breathe.

Like the first disciples, life was not easy for the Pope, but he stood firm in faith, trusting in God to guide him, and trusting that he was fulfilling his calling as a disciple to continue the work and ministry of Jesus.

None of us will ever become Pope or Bishop. We might relate more to Thomas or Peter. Yet we are still called to follow in all of their footsteps of faith.

Every weekend we now gather to celebrate and witness to the same good news-Jesus is risen from the dead! Our Savior and our God died and rose again to show and share God’s great love for each and every one of us! We, too, may not have been there on that first Easter morning, yet we, too, are called to be witnesses to the resurrection. And our witness can continue to change us as well as the world around us.

In the past two weeks I have seen church members, friends and colleagues give witness to their faith at the March for Our Lives and in remembrance of MLKJ.

In the past two weeks I have heard of church members, friends and colleagues offering food to the hungry, tutoring to those struggling to read, shelter and respect to families in IHN, and comfort to those who grieve.

In the past two weeks I have experienced church members, friends and colleagues giving thanks for Jesus’s presence in their lives, giving thanks for the community of faith called the church, and giving thanks for the power and challenge of God’s word.

What is your story of resurrection, how Jesus is making a difference in your life?

What is your story of resurrection, how Jesus is transforming your life? What is your story of resurrection, how you are coming to express your faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

God has given you a story to live, a story to share. Your story may be a grand epic, or your story may be a short story. How are you sharing your story of resurrection in word and action?

The good news of Easter is not simply something to be admired once a year. It is good news meant to transform us week by week, season by season, year by year.

It is good news meant to be believed in, then shared through love and word and action.

As we continue in this Easter season, may we ponder our stories of resurrection, and be open to the many ways to share our stories of resurrection. May God empower us to be witnesses to such power and love, grace and new life.

May it be so. Let us pray.