4-27/28-19 Believe in Jesus Rev. Amy Haines

John 20:19-31 Easter 2

I want to begin today with some audience participation. For each statement that I read, consider if you believe it or doubt it, and when I ask, raise your hand for whether you believe or you doubt. OK, ready?

* Lightning can strike in the same place twice. (True)
* The sun is a medium sized star as compared to other stars. (True)
* You cannot smell when you are sleeping. (True)
* Adults can breathe and swallow at the same time. (False)
* An octopus has three hearts. (True)
* The Feta cheese variety originated in Italy. (False)

--“Believe in Me” 4-28-19 umcdiscipleship.org

Whether those statements were true or false, thank you for taking a risk and claiming whether you believed or you doubted each statement.

Now what would happen if I moved from those factual statements to faith statements? Would you be more or less inclined to raise your hand, to claim your belief or admit your doubt? What if I were to ask if the Bible is the Word of God? If Jesus was resurrected from the dead? If faith can be impactful in our 21st century lives? If the church will be vital 20 years from now?

Today, as we gather to celebrate the second Sunday of the Easter season, we are being asked by the Gospel of John if we believe in Jesus, or if we still doubt the good news of the resurrection.

Today we are being asked by the Gospel of John if Easter is only good news we celebrate one day a year or if Easter is good news that impacts every day of our lives.

Today we are being asked by the Gospel of John if we are people of fear or people of faith.

Last week we celebrated the good news that the women proclaimed to the disciples on that first Easter morning.

The tomb is empty!

Death has been defeated!

Jesus is alive!

Yet remember what the disciples thought of the women’s good news? They thought their words were an idle tale, nonsense, fake words, wishful thinking. The disciples couldn’t comprehend a resurrected Jesus, and thus struggled to believe the good news of the women.

So if you are one who has struggled with what to believe, or struggled to allow your belief to influence your life, know that you are not alone. Even those who had walked with Jesus struggled to believe on that first Easter day!

Today’s scripture continues the story of Easter, from that first Easter evening. The disciples are hiding in fear, behind locked doors, full of doubt and uncertainty.

Consider all that the disciples had seen, heard and experienced in the previous week. First they entered Jerusalem with high hopes for the future. Crowds were singing Jesus’ praise. Then they shared the Passover feast together, and struggled to make sense of what Jesus said that night. One of them was to betray him? Another would deny him? He would give himself up to death for the sins of the world?

Following that Passover meal is when their nightmare began. Jesus was betrayed by one of his own, arrested under cover of darkness, and then all his disciples fled in fear. He was tried, convicted, and crucified on a cross like a common criminal. He died—their friend and Lord—he died, then was buried. And since the men had fled, only the women who followed Jesus had remained faithful at the foot of the cross, and only the women had seen where his body had been laid in a borrowed tomb.

The disciples were lost and afraid, unsure if they would be next, unsure what to think or believe or do.

The disciples struggled to believe in the good news of Jesus’ resurrection—until Jesus came to stand among them, behind their locked doors of fear and failure, to offer himself to them, his presence and his peace, his forgiveness and his renewed calling of them as his disciples.

Jesus suddenly appeared behind the locked doors, and immediately said, “Peace be with you.”

Jesus didn’t chide them or blame them or even forgive them. Instead Jesus blessed them.

“Peace be with you.” -I still love you.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” –Get out there and do the work I have called you to do. You are still my beloved, you are still my disciples, you are still called to go and live by God’s kingdom ways, as I showed you.

Jesus gave these fear-filled disciples what they needed to move from doubt to belief. They needed to be in Jesus’ presence, to be forgiven, loved and set free to live in his name.

I give thanks that on that first Easter, Jesus came to the disciples in different ways, knowing that each of their journeys to faith was as different as their personalities and fears and failures.

The women believed the words of the angels who encountered them at the empty tomb.

John believed when he saw the linen wrappings in the tomb. Mary believed because she heard Jesus’ voice. The two followers on the road to Emmaus believed when they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. The disciples behind locked doors believed because they saw the risen Lord.

Considering the different ways we each approach faith, Professor Fred Craddock once wrote,

“There is a faith based on signs and there is faith that needs none; there is faith weak and faith strong; faith shallow and faith deep; faith growing and faith faltering. In this Gospel [of John] faith is not a decision made once but a decision made anew in every situation.”

--Fred Craddock, p.241

We may come to faith through the love of a community or the intimate sharing of a friend or the living word of Scripture convicting our hearts. We may come to faith in a dramatic moment never to be forgotten or we may come to faith in a series of small decisions or through an ongoing struggle with doubt that leads up to honest belief in Jesus.

The Gospel of John reminds us there is not one right way to come to faith. We are all invited through the love of Jesus into a relationship with Jesus, but we will receive that love and respond to that love in many different ways.

Jesus came to the disciples in the flesh, to offer them his peace and presence, his forgiveness and commission. Yet notice on the first Easter evening that a disciple named Thomas was not present behind the locked doors. Where he was, only God knows. He may have been taking a walk. He may have been running an errand. He may have been figuring out a way to get on with his life. He may have been grieving alone. We don’t know where he was, only that he was not present with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them on Easter evening. Upon returning to the group and hearing again such incredible news of Jesus’ appearing, Thomas proclaimed that unless he could touch Jesus’ scars, he would not and could not believe.

Thomas is often called Doubting Thomas, for doubting the truth of the good news of Easter without proof. Yet I see Thomas more as a realist than a doubter, a healthy skeptic who struggles to believe what he does not understand, a hands-on kind of guy more than one who relies on the hearsay of others.

Thomas reminds me of when I was in school -and I won’t say what grade- heading from lunch to the locker room to get changed for gym class. My friend Tanya was coming down the stairs from reading class and asked if I had heard the news- the space shuttle had blown up!

They had watched it on TV. Tanya looked serious, but I could not believe the words she was telling me. The Challenger blew up? Impossible!

I wondered what kind of a cruel trick she was trying to play on me, and actually asked her if she was joking. But her words were not a joke. And I would not- I could not- believe her news

until I saw the television with my own eyes. Until I saw the proof on TV, I remained a skeptic.

Until I saw the video footage for myself, I could not believe. The Challenger blew up? Impossible! But true.

Thomas yearned for the news of Jesus’ resurrection to be true. He yearned for some hope out of the chaos of the past week. Yet Thomas was a realist, and in real life dead men don’t rise.

In order to hope, in order to believe, Thomas needed to see Jesus alive with his own eyes.

He needed tangible proof in order to believe something so incredible as Jesus alive and risen from the dead!

Do you blame Thomas for being such a skeptic? How often in our world today are we called to believe in something yet want proof that the truth is the truth?

No longer can we believe a person merely on their word and handshake. We must have their signature notarized and in triplicate in order to carry out many business transactions.

Even though local and world events can be viewed instantaneously, live as they occur, we are still skeptical about the political slant of the media and well as the authenticity of what we see and hear.

We live in a world of ethical confusion, where a majority of adults and even teenagers admit to cheating and believe that little white lies are OK. When words no longer hold truth or real meaning, no wonder we are skeptical of what others may say or promise.

We are skeptical nowadays, doubting, until truth is proven as truth.

Yet how much of life cannot be proven? How much of life must be taken on faith? Can love be proven? Can hope be proven? Can faith be proven? Some say yes, some say no.

.. Barbara Crafton once wrote:

"The resurrection is unknowable in the way we like to know things, the journalistic who-what-when-where-how that we grandchildren of the Enlightenment think comprises truth. The Gospel writer was different: he was willing to have his life changed before he understood fully what was changing it.

"Actually, this is the only way life ever really changes. You won't understand marriage until you've been hitched for a while – maybe not even then. You're not going to know what it's like to have a baby until you have one. You don't even know your profession until you've been in it a while. Nothing in life is obvious immediately. It all grows on us.

"This is how we must approach resurrection, as well. No, you don't understand it. But let it grow on you." Then you will be changed.

--Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, The Christian Century, 4-2-2012, adapted

“Can Google Solve the Death Problem?” 4-20-14 homileticsonline.com

When it comes to the story of Christ Jesus, we, like Thomas, are called to believe, to trust, to have faith in a risen Savior that we have not yet seen. When it comes to faith in Jesus, we are called to believe in a resurrection faith that changes everything, as we allow it to grow on us and in us and through us.

Thomas came to believe in the resurrected Christ when one week after Easter Jesus once again appeared to his disciples, including Thomas, this time behind closed doors and said,

“Peace be with you.”

To Thomas he said, “Touch my hands and touch my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Thomas had wanted the opportunity to prove his faith, and received that opportunity.

Yet the Gospel of John never says whether or not Thomas actually touched Jesus or whether just the experience of being in Christ’s presence was enough for Thomas. Whatever the case, when Jesus made himself available to Thomas, Thomas proclaimed his faith in Jesus,

“My Lord and my God!”

Thomas moved from a doubter to a believer, from seeking proof to having a vibrant faith.

In the midst of offering Thomas proof of his resurrected existence, Jesus also offered a blessing all who were to come, including you and me here today, offering this blessing when he proclaimed,

“Have you believed because you have seen me?

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

We will never see Jesus in the flesh this side of heaven, yet we can believe in Jesus. We will never have scientific proof in the resurrection, yet we can be open to resurrection faith changing our lives.

Friends, today you and I are called to believe in the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, to offer our confessions of faith alongside Thomas when he proclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

And yes, you and I will have to believe and have faith in what we do not see or understand—how God loves us so much with unconditional love from our births to our deaths and every moment in between, How God forgives our sins through the blood of his son on the cross, and how God promises us new life through the good news of an empty tomb. We will have to believe on faith, knowing that while we cannot see Jesus in the flesh, we can experience his presence through the Holy Spirit. And like the disciples on that first Easter evening, we, too, have been sent to live and love the world around us in Jesus’ name.

In Beijing, China, Pastor Jonathan Holston once encountered a powerful story of Easter belief and faithfulness. He shares:

…an elderly gentleman told his story of [resurrection] faith that included his congregation.

When the Red Guard had taken power, the churches were closed and the pastors sent into the countryside to work in factories. The church buildings were used as warehouses. He and other members of their congregation had made an agreement to study the Scriptures in private and tithe during their forced absence from corporate worship.

The man said sadly, "We did not realize it would be 13 years of exile from worship."

He said after those years of Bible study and fear, the churches reopened and on that first Sunday of worship, the people returned to the altar to pray and brought their tithes and offerings-all 13 years' worth.

Indeed, blessed are those that have not seen and believed.

--Jonathan Holston “Can I Get a Witness?” Day1.org 4-18-04

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, that our lives will be free from struggle, or 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, still willing to trust, still willing to follow where Jesus leads us. Believing in such good news does mean that we are willing to be in relationship with Jesus, step by faithful step.

..John Gibson Paton was a missionary to New Hebrides. He was translating the Gospel of John into the native language. He could not find a word for *believe*. The natives were cannibals. There was no trust between then. They had no word for it. He asked one of his helpers to describe what he was doing. He was sitting in a chair. He lifted his feet off the floor. The native told him he was resting his whole weight on the chair. That was what he used to translate believe: “to rest one’s whole weight on Jesus.”

--J Michael Shannon, preaching.com

May we be Easter people, people who encounter Jesus in different ways, yet people who share a common faith in a crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

May we be resurrection people, who rest our whole weight on Jesus, trusting in Jesus’ peace, presence and promises even to us today.

May we be faithful people, who in spite of our doubt and struggle, still continue to trust and believe and follow where Jesus leads.

As we go from this place to continue to live and share the good news of Easter, may our words, our actions, and our lives join with Thomas in declaring, “My Lord and my God!”

May it be so. Let us pray.