

What It Takes to Believe

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John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he 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.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger

here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

“These things are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

With those words, the gospel writer John concludes his account of events following the first Easter. His message to the reader sounds like a conclusion to the book, and many scholars think those words did, in fact, mark the original ending to the Fourth Gospel. We don't really know, but this morning I want to focus on his stated goal of helping us “continue to believe.” To begin our reflection, let me share the true story of a heated exchange years ago between a seminary student and a professor at Yale Divinity School.

The professor was lecturing about the history of Christian creeds when a student asked, "What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the [Apostles'] Creed?" The lecturer responded, "You just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart." Thinking that he had been misunderstood, the student asked a second time, with some frustration, this time, "What am I to do...when I have difficulty affirming parts of the Creed--like the Virgin Birth?" Again, the professor replied, "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it. You just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually." The student's voice grew louder: "How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?" and the professor replied, "It's not your creed, it's our creed," meaning the whole Christian community. "Eventually it may come to you," he said. "For some, it takes longer than others..." (Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace*, 1998, Riverhead Books, pp. 64-65)

That professor's response could have described some first-century

believers, too. The narrative we just read doesn't speak of students in a classroom struggling to accept an ancient creed, but rather their acceptance of an essential tenet in that creed: namely, "on the third day he rose again from the dead." John's verses tell of three encounters between the risen Christ and his disciples. By the end, all of them had accepted the truth of Jesus' resurrection.

Earlier on Easter, in verses we pondered last Sunday, Mary Magdalene rushed in to tell the group that Jesus' body was missing. Peter and the beloved disciple ran to see for themselves, looked around, and left. Mary remained and, as she began to weep, heard her name called, turned around, and saw Christ. Soon, she ran and told the eleven disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

Our two lessons this morning continue the narrative, describing how Jesus appeared to ten of the disciples that evening and how they didn't recognize him at first. "Peace be with you," he said, and then showed them the wounds in his hands and side. We aren't told if it was the words or the physical evidence of the crucifixion that convinced them, but in response, they believed, too. Thomas wasn't present for that moment, and when he returned later, the group said to him, "We have seen the Lord." He answers, "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."

The next Sunday, Jesus appears again, and this time Thomas is present. Christ invites his disciple to take the action the follower had declared would be required, namely, to touch the wounds. "Do not doubt," Jesus says, "but believe." Thomas no longer needs to take that step as he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." It is then that John speaks of the reason for his

gospel: so the reader may “continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.”

Often in reflecting on that scene, attention turns to Thomas, the one who demanded more proof. Believers have often been critical of that one disciple who wouldn't listen to 10 of his colleagues, a reaction that led to the enduring nickname “Doubting Thomas.” What is overlooked in that unfair moniker is that all the other followers of Jesus took time to believe, too. For each of them, the time had to be right.

A seminary classmate of mine served for years as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Grapevine, Texas. In a newsletter article, he told how, on the outskirts of London some years earlier, several abandoned warehouses were torn down to build a new highway. Budget shortfalls forced a halt to the project, and the earth lay exposed for eight months before efforts resumed. When the workers returned, they found the area adorned with an array of flowers in full bloom.

Such an event wouldn't have been newsworthy except for the fact that the flowers on that construction site were unknown. Botanists from a nearby university were summoned and, after collecting samples, determined these plants were ones the Romans had brought with them when they sailed up the Thames River thousands of years earlier. The seeds had remained hidden for centuries, buried deep in the soil, dormant beneath bricks and mortar. Yet under new conditions, as rainfall and sunlight touched them again, they stirred to life. (As told by Bob Crilley, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Grapevine, TX, in their March 1999 newsletter).

It took the right conditions for 12 first-century disciples to believe that the resurrection had happened. For Mary Magdalene, it required Jesus calling her by name. For the Ten hiding behind locked doors, hearing his voice

didn't seem to be enough, so he showed his hands and his side. For Thomas, it was only when Jesus invited that skeptical follower to touch the wounds that he understood. It was different for each of them, and the same is true for us

Yet John declares that his narrative is not only to help persons come to faith, but also to "continue to believe." What those first twelve Christians demonstrate is that faith often includes hard times. Each of them experienced the agony of those days between his death and the joy of Easter. Each of them knew what it was like to wait, unsure of what the future would bring. Each of them found their faith challenged as never before. That kind of thing happens still

If asked at the start of this year, I am guessing most people who heard the name Savannah Guthrie would have thought first of her role as co-anchor of *The Today Show*. Others might have known her as the author of a children's book entitled *Mostly What God Does Is Love You*. Since February 1, she has been the grieving daughter, who, along with two siblings, has endured a public agony since the abduction of their 84-year-old mother, Nancy. Many of us have followed that story, including grainy security camera images of the alleged perpetrator. Despite the diligent efforts of law enforcement and wide media attention, the case has not been solved. Throughout the ordeal, Savannah has spoken openly about her faith. Last Monday, she returned to the air.

The previous day, her home congregation in Midtown Manhattan aired an Easter service that included a video testimonial from Guthrie. Let me share a portion of her words with you.

With a somber face, she began, "Good Morning, everybody, and Happy Easter.' And Easter is happy; it is flowers and pastels, and baby bunnies. It

is sunshine and joy and hope. It is rebirth and second chances. It is new life and fresh starts. It is the most important day for all of us who believe. Even more than Christ's birth, more than his death, his resurrection, his second birth into a permanent life, that is what is most crucial to us. His revival and resurrection mean the same for us. We celebrate today the promise of a new life that never ends in death.

“But, standing here today, I have to tell you, there are moments in which that promise seems irretrievably far away, when life itself seems far harder than death. These moments of deep disappointment with God, the feeling of utter abandonment...In our tradition, we are taught to take comfort in the fact that our friend Jesus, in his short life, experienced every single emotion that we humans can feel. That his taking on the form of humanity made him not a distant observer to our pain, but a hands-on experiencer of it.”

She then spoke of how the abduction of their mother had led her to wonder if Jesus really knew the kind of pain she and her siblings were facing. “It isn't wrong to think such thoughts, to challenge our God with questions,” she continued. “God does not ask us to be stoics...Our questions to God, our wrestling with God, this is his opportunity, for through our authenticity and vulnerability comes a portal of revelation, the imparting of truth and wisdom.

“And so, it went for me this portal opening as I stared at yet another incongruently luminous desert sunset amidst my spirit's utter darkness. Suddenly, I remembered the grave. I remembered three days in the grave...As humans living on this earth, now we are all suspended in that moment of uncertainty. Not three days, but thousands of years between his cross and our resurrection with him. Our faith gives us a spiritual conviction that we will be reborn, that God will redeem this pain, that

every tear will be wiped away, that our Easter is coming.

“But we live viscerally in the meantime, the mean time of feeling unsure, lost, abandoned, disappointed, enraged, forgotten. Our comfort is that our God has felt those feelings from the perspective of humanity, that he has compassion on us, and that he promises, if not immediate answers, his sweet presence. He promises closeness to the brokenhearted. Somehow, miraculously, his loving and gentle presence that makes the meantime less mean.

She then concluded: “Perhaps, perhaps this is too dark a message to share on Easter morning, but I have long believed that we miss out on fully celebrating resurrection if we do not acknowledge the feelings of loss, pain, and yes, death. It is the darkness that makes this morning’s light so magnificent, so blindingly beautiful. It is all the brighter because it is so desperately needed.

“So, I close my eyes this morning, and I feel the sunshine. I see a bright vision of the day when heaven and earth pass away because they are one on earth as it is in heaven. When we celebrate today, this is what we celebrate, and I celebrate, too. I still believe, and so I say with conviction, ‘Happy Easter.’” (Guthrie, Savannah, goodshepherdnewyork.com, 04/04/26)

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus said. The gospel writer added, “These are written so that you may continue to believe.” May it be so for each one of us on this Second Sunday of Easter and all the days to come.