

A Sermon by the Rev. Mo. Crystal Hardin
The Second Sunday of Easter (C)
Sunday, April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27-32 | Psalm 118:14-29

Revelation 1:4-8 | John 20:19-31

I preach in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *him who is - and who was - and who is to come* (Rev. 1:4). Amen.

On Easter we make a bold claim. Alleluia. Christ is Risen, we say. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

We make this claim every Easter anew, and yet it is a claim that we, as Christians, live by at this time for all time. Resurrection. To this we hold fast: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. And, we Christians believe in the resurrection of the dead. It is why our funeral liturgy begins

*"I know that my Redeemer lives
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.
After my awaking, he will raise me up;
and in my body I shall see God."* (BCP 491)

Resurrection. It is how we know that, *yes, we will all return to the dust; yet, even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.* (BCP 499)

The Reverend Sam Wells deems the Resurrection "a breathtaking mystery . . . the epicenter of the Christian faith."¹ It is, he says, "something to be discovered, believed, and lived . . . It's not something to agree with in your head. It's not even something to believe in your heart. It's something to know in your gut."²

Resurrection. A claim that is absolutely unreasonable, but, nevertheless, true.

¹ Sam Wells, "Resurrection in Nine Words," April 1, 2018, <http://staging2.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/easter-day-5/>.

² Ibid.

My friend and fellow preacher Sarah Condon tells a story—an Old Mississippi legend is what she calls it—about a preacher who took to the pulpit in his church on Easter Sunday. Looking out at the crowd—a much larger than usual crowd of course—he takes a moment to gather the attention of the room. With all eyes on him, he leans forward and speaks into the microphone:

It's all true. Happy Easter.

And then he returns to his seat.

It's all true.

The Reverend Fleming Rutledge wondered aloud in a sermon once: “Why is it that so many people flock to the churches on Easter Day, listen to the message that Jesus has been raised from the dead, receive their Easter Communion, and then don't return? If you were invited to dinner with someone who had risen from the dead and they asked you to come again the following week, wouldn't you want to go?”

She later concludes, “It occurred to me that the reason people don't come back on the Sunday after Easter is that they don't really believe that anything unusual has taken place. Something nice, maybe; something cheerful and uplifting; but not an honest-to-God resurrection from the dead.”³

It's all true. Isn't it?

I learned something new about myself last week. Well, maybe its better to say that I learned something old about myself last week under new conditions. I finally broke down and took the Enneagram, which bills itself “one of the most powerful and insightful tools for understanding ourselves and others.” In any event, there are nine “types” of personalities according to the Enneagram. And, after spending an hour submitting myself to a rather invasive questionnaire about the way I approach the world, I was labeled: Type 6: The Loyalist.

Sounds okay, right. Loyal is good. Positive. Then, I read the small print: The Loyalist, it read. The Committed, Security-Oriented Type: Engaging, Responsible, Anxious, and Suspicious.

³ Fleming Rutledge, “Low Sunday or High Sunday?” in *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 300.

I would have preferred it said: engaging, responsible, peaceful, and faithful. But, alas. It did not.

On this the Second Sunday after Easter, we hear the story of Thomas, the one who doubts. And, I can't help but wonder if Thomas too is an Enneagram 6. The Committed, Security-Oriented Type.

For some, belief seems to come easy. The disciple, *the one whom Jesus loved*, needed only to see the empty tomb: *he saw and believed* (John 20:8).

Still others seem to work harder to believe. Like Mary weeping at the tomb and the disciples huddled frightened behind locked doors, they must first pass through the land of tears or the land of fears before proclaiming, *I have seen the Lord* (John 20:18).

And then, for some it seems belief is difficult. Perhaps they have seen too much—too much death, destruction, harm—experienced the sting of disappointment too acutely—the sting of broken promises, false hopes, unreliable witnesses.

Thomas witnessed the crucifixion of his leader, his teacher, his friend. He witnessed the crucifixion of his hope on the hard wood of the cross.

That is what he knew to be *all true*.

There is a hymn that reads:

*These things did Thomas count as real:
The warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
The grain of wood, the heft of stone,
The last frail twitch of blood and bone.*

*His brittle certainties denied
That one could live when one had died,
Until his fingers read like Braille
The markings of the spear and nail.*

Thomas had committed himself to Jesus, was loyal unto death. *But Thomas . . . was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord."* (John 20:24-25). But, *his brittle certainties denied that one could live when one had died.*

Thomas cannot believe. Still reeling from what he has seen and suffered, he does not trust what his friends tell him that they have seen. He sets instead the conditions under which he could be made to believe: *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* (John 20:25).

At first glance, Thomas only seems to want what the others have already received: visual proof that something has occurred. That Jesus is no longer in the tomb. That He is Risen. That it's true. And, maybe that's all there is to it. And, who could fault him for it, really?

But, if we look more closely, we may find that Thomas does not simply seek visual proof; he seeks instead to know in his gut the Resurrection Truth. This is the truth he hopes for, the truth that brings him back to that house with his fellow disciples even after he missed the risen Lord the first time around. Thomas wants to touch with his hands the wounds of Jesus, the very one who was crucified, died, and was buried. He wants to feel his way to the mystery that is the epicenter of the Christian faith: to know that there has been an honest-to-God resurrection from the dead.

A week later, Thomas does see Jesus, who provides him exactly what he needed to believe. As if to say.

It's all true.

And Thomas answers, *My Lord and My God*. This is the highest and most certain proclamation in the Gospel of John and it came by way of doubt.

It's all true.

But if you sometimes doubt it, you would not be alone. But, hear what Jesus says: *Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe* (John 20:26-29).

As the Fleming Rutledge points out:

That's you, and that's me. We are the ones who have not seen with our eyes like Thomas. We are the ones who have not seen and yet, in spite of that lack, receive the Lord's blessing and become believers.

And so John concludes his Gospel with these words:

Now Jesus did many other signs...which are not written in this book; but these are written [so] that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.⁴

May it be so.

*May we, O God, by grace believe
And, in believing, still receive
The Christ Who held His raw palms out
And beckoned Thomas from his doubt.*⁵

Amen.

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, "In the Bleak Midwinter," September 21, 2016, <http://www.generousorthodoxy.org/sermons/in-the-bleak-midwinter.aspx>.

⁵ Thomas Troeger, "These Things Did Thomas Count as Real" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), https://hymnary.org/text/these_things_did_thomas_count_as_real.