

Faith at Our Fingertips

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John 20:19-31: Second Sunday of Easter

Christ is risen. He is out of the box. Out of the tomb. He's out and about. John's Gospel shows Christ breaking into a room even though the doors are locked. The reading from Acts shows how an angel of God opened the prison doors, setting the apostles free to speak the words they had been given to speak. The risen Christ is breaking in, breaking out. And yet, there are some folks who have their doubts.

I want to say a word about two kinds of doubt. Let's begin with so-called Doubting Thomas. He's the guy who wasn't there when the risen Christ appeared to the other disciples. When they report having seen Jesus, Thomas won't take their word for it. "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."

What do you think about that statement? Do you think less of him because he's not willing to believe the news of the Resurrection unless he can see the evidence with his own eyes, touch it with his hands? To me, Thomas sounds like the sort of guy who isn't willing to settle for second-hand truth. He's not going to believe something just because his father or his mother told him that it's true. Or because his teacher says he should swallow it whole, no questions asked, or because anyone else in authority says it's so. "Because I said so, that's why" is not the sort of argument that will wash with Thomas. No, he wants to know about the Resurrection for himself. He wants to see the risen Christ with his own two eyes, touch him with his own two hands.

And when indeed the risen Christ appears to Thomas, what does Christ say to him? "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus welcomes Thomas and all his doubt. Jesus knows that doubt like the doubt of Thomas is energizing. When we want to know the truth for ourselves, in our own experience, we set out on a spiritual quest, a search for our own authentic faith. Doubt is like wind in the sails of faith: it pushes us forward; it dares us to reach out, to risk, to learn. It is doubt and the desire to question, to test, to probe, that has set many a spiritual pilgrim to try out the experiment of starting a practice of regular prayer or engaging in reflection or spiritual reading. Doubt may be uncomfortable; it may make us restless, but it will keep us awake and honest with ourselves, and it may blow us to explore uncharted seas.

What about the other kind of doubt? I am thinking now about the beginning of the story, when the disciples are huddled together in a locked-up room, as the text says, "for fear of the Jews." What does this mean? Are they afraid that the Jewish authorities will come after them because they are accomplices of an executed criminal? Are they afraid that the Jewish leaders will accuse them of conspiring to steal away Jesus' body from the tomb? Or could it be that it is Jesus himself they are afraid of? Jesus, another Jew, a Jew whom they abandoned at the end, whom one of them denied three times? Are they huddled in fear because they've heard rumors of the Resurrection and are full of guilt and anxiety?

Have you ever wronged someone and then been ashamed to look them in the eye? Have you

ever found yourself avoiding someone because you know you treated that person badly? I wonder if it was something like that with the disciples. Imagine their reaction, then, when Jesus appears before them, and his first words are “Peace be with you.” It is peace he brings them. Forgiveness. Acceptance. However much they’ve abandoned and denied him, he loves them still.

“Here,” he says to them. “See my wounded hands and side. It is I. And I love you. I will never leave you.”

And it is not only peace that he gives them. He gives them a commission, a task. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Christ not only loves us and forgives us, Christ needs us. We have been sent here on a mission. We have a job to do. When I look at this story of Jesus and the disciples, I see Jesus confronting the kind of doubt that walls itself up in a locked room and says, “I’ve done wrong. I’m not good enough to show my face. In my heart of hearts I don’t think it’s true that God loves me or desires me or needs me. I don’t believe it.”

If that conversation is going on somewhere inside you, today Jesus comes to you to say, “Peace be with you. I’ve forgiven what you have done wrong, and I will give you the strength to amend your life. All that stuff you keep telling yourself about not being good enough, about not measuring up, about being inadequate—all that focus on your own sinfulness—that is one big red herring, a self absorbed preoccupation that prevents you from seeing how much I love you, how much I desire you.”

Is it possible that what you and I call our “doubts” about God—our doubts, say, about the goodness of God or the existence of God—are sometimes a way of protecting ourselves from the intimacy that God longs to offer us? For that is what God so desires: to be intimate with us, to draw close. The whole of Scripture can be read as a love story in which God constantly woos, seeks, and appeals to creation, trying to draw us close, longing for our loving response. Will we say yes to God’s love?

To Thomas, who refuses to believe unless he can see Jesus with his own eyes and touch him with his hands, Jesus says, “Draw close. Gaze at me. Stretch out your hands and touch me. I am as close as your fingertips.” To the disciples who hide out in a locked room, awash in fear and guilt, Jesus comes and says “Peace. I forgive you. I love you. Today I send you out, as the Father sent me. Let me blow my breath into you, so that with every breath, you breathe in my Spirit. I am with you. You are mine. I will be with you to the end.”

Some of us today will stretch out our hands to receive the body and blood of Christ, just as Thomas longed to stretch out his hands to touch Christ’s wounded hands and side. We too long to know that the risen Christ is real, alive, here with us, and we will meet him today in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Some of us will meet the risen Christ in the hands that touch our heads as we come forward for his healing. Whatever our doubts today, whatever our misgivings, wherever we’re holding back, Jesus invites us to step forward, to step out, to accept the gift of his intimacy.



*Published in Preaching Through the Year of Luke, ed. Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer,
Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000, pp. 49-51*