

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
October 10, 2021
John 20:19–31

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives, speak your eternal Word to us that we may respond to your gracious promises with faithfulness, service and love. Amen.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked 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 then; 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, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Many Bibles will title these final couple of verses in John 20:30–31 as "The Purpose of John's Gospel," which is interesting to put at the end. Different than the beginning of Luke, where the purposes is at the beginning. John tells the story and then tells you why he told the story. The summary it tells us is that we might believe. This is not written for your information, not written for your understanding, not written to affirm or build up your theological house of cards. No, it is written so that you may believe. Belief and faith are sometimes confused.

In the Presbyterian church, persons are sometimes asked to write a "Statement of faith." This most often occurs with confirmands or as someone is going through the ordination process to become a pastor. At some point, a candidate for ordination will write a statement of faith and it will be read or presented to the Presbytery and the Presbytery can ask the candidate about the statement. Most often these statements start with the words, "I believe..."

Interesting that we get this story of Thomas right before the summary statement that says all of the gospel is told so that we might believe, and that Thomas so often is mislabeled as doubting Thomas, the opposite of the believer.

There is nothing about the story that talks about doubt. Never has been, never will be. It's not there. But for many, there seems to be an idea that to doubt, to question is to have a lack of faith.

When I was first thinking about whether I was being called into the becoming a pastor in high school, I had a meeting with my youth pastor Nick and I told him I thought I had too many questions about faith and that was why I couldn't pursue church leadership. When I spoke with him more than 10 years later, when I was again considering my calling, I recall I had even more questions, but, by then, I had a different understanding of faith.

Faith isn't about knowing every answer and having absolute certainty about everything. Frederick Buechner says, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Pastor and writer Brian McClaren talks about his experience with doubt and having members of his church come to him with deep questions. He says, "If you came to me with any tough issues, the very last thing I'd want to do is offer a short, easy answer. To do justice to your doubts would involve us developing an authentic relationship, engaging in real conversation, and going through a rather lengthy process. Instead of coming in as the big teacher with all the answers, I'd try to come alongside you as a companion in the search for those good things: truth, honesty, justice, and all the rest."

This, I think is what John means by his closing summary. That you may come to believe.

It is not some rationalization that faith happens through hearing. It is not about being able to say confidently some creed or doctrine. It is not some assurance of a correct confessional statement.

When John says, “so that you may believe,” he means so that you might enter into or be assured of your relationship with Jesus.

One scholar of the gospel of John says, “Belief in John is never a noun, but always a verb, and believing in Jesus is to be in relationship with Jesus.” The believing is not creedal but relational.

Last week, Pastor Mary mentioned that we would focus for the next few weeks reflecting on what resurrection means. That it is helpful to remind ourselves that through all the hardship, through the doubt we may face, that we are an Easter people, people of the resurrection.

Not so that we might believe some understanding of a super-natural event that is required to be believed for some effect on eternal salvation... but rather so that we can think about, ask questions about, so we can be reflective on why resurrection matters. How it might impact us and what it looks like in our lives.

For some, resurrection is about something that happened once before, and that will eventually happen to them, but it isn't a vision of relationship and community here and now.

But, if it is only that, if resurrection is only a belief to be assured of and to convince others of, then resurrection loses its relational power. “At the end of the day, resurrection can't only be about eternal life in the future. It can't just be about some place in heaven that awaits us. While I take comfort in that, while I trust in that, for me, it is more than that.

Resurrection has to also be the promise of abundant life with God, forever AND now. That is salvation for John, relationship with Jesus, with God, here and now.”

Thomas simply wanted, simply needed what the other disciples received, what Mary received, which led all of them to utter the same confession, “I have seen the Lord.” Thomas was looking for his own encounter with the risen Jesus, not to prove that Jesus was alive once again, but to believe once again that the promise of relationship with Jesus would never be taken away, not even by those who take away life as if they hold life in their hands.

Thomas helps us see that manifestations of resurrection are a necessary part of a post-resurrection existence. Thomas helps us see that looking for resurrection in our lives is not the same as demanding a sign of proof that we might believe the right things in order to make it into heaven.

Resurrection is relationship. Resurrection is vulnerability and openness to one another.

Jesus says, “Look, touch, do not be afraid. He invites us into deep intimacy with him, exposing his wounds to us, inviting us into a personal experience with him. And he invites us to do the same with others. This is why I love that we as a church in our worship share our prayers, we express our joys and concerns. This is a time when we hear the wounds of someone in our community wounds and we may be in community with them, supporting them, loving them, and praying for them. It is a time when we get to acknowledge in some small way that we are all not perfect, that we may have some fear or doubt, but we have faith that God is with us. I think this is a way for us, like Thomas, to ask for what we need to have faith.

I wrote to you in the Oak Leaves earlier this month that I have grown to trust the words, “I don’t know.” I shared a quote with you from the writer Anne Lamott, who says, “I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot and have no real certainty about anything.” And then she remembers something a friend tells her, which is, “the opposite of faith

is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”ⁱ

Resurrection is relationship. Resurrection is among us, whether we see it or not. Whether we recognize it or not. Even if we have doubts, we can trust in our relationships with one another.

When we are obsessed with confirmation of certainty or adequate justification, “we miss the truth entirely, ‘the truth’ that never was *something* to be believed but *someone* that makes believing possible.

Someone who redefines believing as relationship. Someone who recreates community in and by relationship. Someone who reimagines our lives as nothing other than a relationship with God. Someone who was raised from the dead so that we might have life and have it abundantly.”

When we “see” resurrection as relationship, we know how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity (Psalm 133), and we cannot but strive for fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).

What Thomas needed, what we all need, is reassurance of relationship. A relationship that will never be broken, that will never be abandoned, that will never know separation, and will forever be. Thomas wanted and needed the assurance many of us love to hear that nothing, not even death, will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Through all the uncertainty, through all the fears and doubts, through our earthly relationships that are fragile and broken, Thomas needed the security and the promise of the relationship that will not end, that will never be broken. In the resurrection, Thomas is assured of the relationship that is secure.

When we encounter and see resurrection, we are able to be in relationship with Jesus and one another. We can then share our stories, we can share what we have experienced, we can hold fast to one another so that others may have an experience of resurrection through relationship.

The purpose of our lives, the purpose of our worship, the purpose of preaching, the purpose of our education, of our mission, of our fellowship, of our caring is that people experience the living God through the community of the Body of Christ empowered and enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

Through the word of scripture, through our worship, through serving others or being served, through learning and asking questions, through sharing our doubt and expressing fears and joys, or, as has been my experience, through the care and concern of the gathered community of Jesus, that is through community, specifically, the community of the church, through the power of relationship.

Let us hold fast to one another until the comfort, the assurance, the wisdom, the peace, or whatever else is needed comes. Until Christ is experienced, let us hold fast to one another. Let us remember that resurrection is relationship.

Amen.

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p 257.