

April 12
2015

Showing Up

JOHN 20:19-31

BCUMC/CCUMC

Last Sunday most of you were here for Easter. We had delightful, uplifting service celebrating the resurrection and our faith in Christ. We read the story of the empty tomb, of how Christ rose from the dead, and how he would meet the disciples – and us – in Galilee; that is, in the ordinariness of our daily lives.

It's hard to leave church on Easter morning and not feel some sense of joy, and some sense of faith and hope. I leave Easter worship, like Christmas, on a sort of "faith high," surrounded by witnesses to God's love. This time of year I feel particularly close to God. The long journey of Lent is over, and joy has filled the church.

So, we come back to church this week, and we expect the hard stuff to be over. We expect an easier story, or a celebration, right?

Except that's not quite what we get. The story we read today, in the book of John, starts on that first Easter Sunday. Jesus has appeared to Mary in the garden. After that, he goes to the room where the rest of his disciples are holed up. And they're afraid. We aren't told whether Mary has been there yet to tell them that Jesus is alive, but I don't think she'd waste any time getting there.

Even so, they're scared, and for good reason. Jesus' disciples are in serious danger of being imprisoned or even killed. And suddenly He appears, right through the locked doors, they can see the wounds in his hands and his side, and he says "peace be with you." He breathes on them, they believe, and he goes away.

But there's a disciple missing. And this would probably be me. Jesus comes back from the dead and everybody's there – except for me, right? Well, Thomas wasn't there. Maybe he was at the store. Maybe he was running late after work. Maybe he was stuck in camel-traffic -- I don't know -- but whatever the reason, when Thomas gets there all the other disciples tell him they saw Jesus.

They probably said something like, “Thomas, you won’t believe who was just here!” And he doesn’t. Thomas tells them, “Unless I see it for myself, and can touch his wounds, I won’t believe.”

I often wonder how Thomas must have felt right then. When I was about 7, my dad went to town to the grocery store or something like that. He asked me if I wanted to go with him. Now at that age, I had better things to do than to go the boring old store with dad. So I stayed home. When my dad got home the very first thing he said to me was, “You should’ve come with me. The circus is in town – you missed the elephants.”

I missed the elephants! If only I had gone with him. Why on earth did I stay home? I loved elephants back then – still do, in fact – my 8th birthday cake had purple frosting elephants on it -- it was awesome!

This was one of those experiences that stick with you. All these years later I still wonder if dad just made that up about the elephants or if he really saw them. I still think twice if somebody asks me if I want to go somewhere. What if I miss something? What if I miss the elephants?

Did Thomas think the disciples were playing a joke on him? See what happens when you skip church? Or were they telling the truth, and if so, why didn’t Jesus hang around so Thomas could see him too? All he knew was that the other disciples were in on something, and he wasn’t.

But the next week, there he is again. Thomas is there with them, and he still hasn’t seen Jesus. And all of a sudden the same thing happens. Jesus appears and tells Thomas to put his hands on his, and feel the wounds from the nails. And he does. And he believes.

Jesus asks him, “Do you believe because you have seen me?” Then says, “Blessed are those who do not see yet believe.”

I’ve always felt bad for Thomas. He was asked to do what the other disciples didn’t have to do. He was asked to believe sight unseen. Any of the others would have had the

same struggle. And yet, we all know Thomas as ‘Doubting Thomas.’ I wonder -- how long did it take after this happened for the other disciples to call him that. “Oh, that’s doubting Thomas. Jesus had to come and let him touch his hands before he believed.”

I’d hate to be remembered only by one moment of doubt -- because I’ve had plenty of them. And I could be “Doubting Brad” pretty easily. And I think it’s safe to assume that most of us fall into that category. But as much as Thomas sort of gets this label as the disciple who didn’t believe, he’s always been a favorite of mine. We forget that when Jesus’ life was at risk by returning to Judea to see Lazarus after he died, Thomas was the one who told his fellow disciples that they should go with Jesus, no matter what the danger.

Out of all of them, he’s the one I think most of us can relate to. Most of us understand what it is to live between faith and doubt. In school they love to say things like, ‘we live in the tension’ between this or that.

Between faith and doubt. We tend think of faith and doubt as opposites. But that’s not really true. Fear is closer to the opposite of faith than doubt. But doubt is often a key part of our faith journey. It’s a stop along the way that we all make if we’re honest, more than once. And when we find ourselves there, it doesn’t mean you’re a bad Christian or an unbeliever. It’s a sign that we are taking our relationship with God seriously enough that we are letting ourselves be honest, asking questions, and allowing ourselves to take this journey without worrying about the destination. It’s all about the journey anyway, right?

Thomas was like that. As much as he will always be “doubting Thomas,” remember, he’s also known to millions as Saint Thomas. And there was a great thing on TV last week about how he was the first to spread Christianity in India – although he didn’t want to go there. In the end his doubt, his desire to know Jesus for himself, was what brought him faith. And that faith gave him the strength to bring that message to so many others. And if you go to India today, St. Thomas is the one who didn’t just doubt, but who believed, and who helped others to do so as well.

But he was lucky, right? I mean, he got to see Jesus, to touch Jesus, to know Jesus, in a way you and I don't. Doubting Thomas may have become a saint, but what hope is there for me, or for you?

I was reading a story recently about a woman in her 30's who had this overwhelming spiritual experience one day. She knew God was present, and she felt God calling her to do something new, and scary, and hard. She couldn't deny how clearly she felt God's presence. It's the kind of spiritual experience most of us want; that moment of clarity; Clear marching orders. It's like Thomas getting to actually touch the hand of Jesus.

The young woman did go out, and for the next 50 years she did amazing things. But inside she still doubted. She still wrestled with her faith. She had what Christian writers call a "dark night of the soul." Sometimes she even questioned the existence of God. Her lack of faith bothered her.

But rather than receiving the dubious title of, "Doubting Theresa," we know her today as Mother Theresa. I used to see pictures of her and think, she's so holy -- so faithful. She must be so certain of what she is doing. But in the last few years, we're learning that that wasn't the case. She was like us. And she was like Thomas.

We Protestants don't canonize saints anymore, but our Catholic brothers and sisters do. And Mother Theresa is very close to becoming a saint. She's already been beatified. Even with her doubts, she was found worthy of the title of Saint.

Or, maybe, because of her doubts. We all doubt. At least all of us who see faith as a journey, and not a one-time stop. Our faith gets shaken, we question it, and we wonder why Jesus doesn't appear to us when everyone around us seems to have seen him. We might even feel a bit ashamed of our doubt.

I wonder if Thomas did that first week. Why couldn't he just accept what the others said? Why did he have to see for himself? I wonder if the next Sunday he thought about not

going back. He wasn't "one of them" anymore. He was the doubter. The one who hadn't seen.

But he did go back. Maybe because he loved Jesus so much that he needed to talk with friends about him, even if he wasn't quite convinced yet. Maybe he went back because it was better than being alone. Maybe he went back because he thought maybe, just maybe, Jesus would come again. Whatever the reason, he went back to his little community – his 'family of choice' -- in his hour of greatest doubt, just like many of you come here every week, and that day Jesus showed up and he believed.

Doubt can be the thing that boosts our faith – the thing that shakes us up. Doubt can be what pushes us out the door of our once comfortable lives and into a new, and better, world. Doubt can be the ticket to our journey to new life. Doubt is a sign not of the absence of God, but God's presence; working on us -- and in us -- to do something new.

I'll close with this story by Gene Robinson, retired Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire. He was talking about the parting of the Red Sea and how we have this movie version in our heads where Moses lifted his arms and you could see across to the other side. The reality, he says, was probably more like this: the people put one foot into the water, tentatively, and the waters rolled back a little. And then they put another foot down, and the waters rolled back more. And so on, and so on, until they found they had safely reached the other shore.

It's the same with doubt. You won't see the other shore. And you don't have to. God is already there. And God is with you in the waters. Doubt as much as you need to, but try to leave just enough room for the faith that God will show you the next right step. And just keep putting one foot in front of the other. That's the life of doubt, and that's the life of faith. Amen.