

April 28, 2019 – First Sunday of Easter
Seminary Student Bristol Reading, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 20:19-31

Beloved Doubters

I asked my husband Michael what he thought about this Gospel story, about Thomas not believing in the risen Jesus until he could personally see and touch him, and the first thing Michael said was, “Well... it’s pretty relatable.”

And it is, isn’t it? Who hasn’t felt like a Thomas before? Who hasn’t wanted to personally *see* and *touch* Jesus, to be able to *know* beyond a shadow of a doubt that this whole resurrection thing is *real* ... that *is* pretty relatable.

In some ways, it even seems like it’s only getting *harder* to believe in resurrection – the further we get away from Jesus’ own time. After all, Jesus’ disciples didn’t have the same conceptions of science, medicine, or death that we do today. This Easter resurrection story, it raises a lot of questions, doesn’t it? It’s a tad bit... unbelievable.

Yet even as *witnesses* to all of this, the disciples seem to have struggled to believe. The Gospel texts show us that these experiences – witnessing Jesus’ being killed, finding his tomb empty, encountering the risen Christ – these experiences were shocking and confusing for the disciples. They, too, had trouble really believing that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Some of them have an even harder time believing than others.

In the story we heard this morning, the disciples are gathered together, hiding out in fear. The heightened tension between Jesus and the authorities has not ended after his death and the disciples are afraid that their association with him may still get them into trouble.

Suddenly, Jesus is there with them. He speaks to them calmly, breathes on them, and reminds them of the divine spirit that will continue to be present with them as they further the mission of the gospel. Can you imagine such an incredible, powerful moment?

But someone from the group is missing. *Thomas*, one of the disciples, isn’t there for this stunning encounter with the risen Christ, and when his companions later tell him what they have experienced, Thomas says, “I won’t believe it until I experience it *myself*.” Thomas wants to see this risen Jesus, to touch this body that is supposedly alive again.

Then, the whole scene basically repeats itself. The disciples are together again, this time *with* Thomas. They’re still scared. The door is still locked. Jesus still shows up. And this time, he goes right to Thomas. Jesus wasn’t there when Thomas voiced his concerns, but he seems to understand Thomas’ heart anyway.

“Go ahead and touch me,” Jesus says, “You can be sure that it’s really me. You can be sure that I’m really alive; I’m really real. I’m really *here*.”

The text doesn't even tell us whether or not Thomas actually *did* touch Jesus. Maybe the invitation to do so was powerful enough in itself. Maybe what Thomas really needed was just for Jesus to show up.

It's this story that earns Thomas the traditional nickname, "Doubting Thomas," although the Gospel text doesn't actually use the word "doubt."

When Jesus praises those who believe in him even when they can't see him, it sounds a little like a criticism of Thomas... like a criticism of *anyone* who doubts what they can't see and touch. Is Jesus saying that his followers shouldn't have questions about the resurrection, that they should have doubt-proof faith?

Instead of reading the story as Jesus responding to Thomas' doubt with *criticism*, maybe we might read the story as Jesus responding to Thomas' doubt with *compassion*. After all, the risen Jesus *came back* again, came back *for Thomas*.

Jesus didn't leave Thomas alone in his doubt. Jesus came back to be fully *present* with him. Jesus came back for Thomas in his doubt. And Jesus comes back for us in our doubt.

Even at Easter, a season of proclaiming Christ's victory over death, a season full of celebration and alleluias, even now, doubt is still part of the Gospel story. Doubt is part of Thomas' experience of faith, and doubt is part of our experience of faith. We can believe that Christ is risen, indeed, and still doubt that Christ is really present here with us now.

This Easter season arrived for me in the midst of some major life transition, and I have had many moments of doubting Christ's presence with me.

This week, I moved out of my apartment in the West Loop because my husband and I are relocating to Minnesota. This is my final semester of seminary coursework, and next year I will be a full-time intern at a church in Minneapolis – the last step in my process to become a Lutheran pastor.

I am excited about my progress in the journey towards ordination, but I also experience fear and doubt. Do I have the courage, wisdom, and compassion for a life's work of ministry? Will there be a church that wants to call me as a pastor when I finish my internship? How will I be a good pastor in seasons when I can't even hear God's voice in my own life?

I can't tell you that Jesus has magically appeared to me in physical form in the midst of these doubts, breathed the Holy Spirit into me, and empowered me with the mission of the Gospel as I move into the next step of my ministry.

But I can tell you that Jesus has been really present to me even in the midst of my doubts. I would even say that I get to touch the Body of Christ...

Right here, at Irving Park Lutheran Church.

When we share the peace before communion, we reach towards one another and shake hands, or offer hugs. We say “Peace be with you,” which is just what risen Jesus said when he greeted the disciples after his resurrection. The same holy spirit that Jesus breathed onto the disciples then is still present with us here, now.

That’s why we talk about the church as the “Body of Christ.” We believe the Christ is really present in the assembled people. When the faithful gather together in prayer and worship, Jesus is there with them. Jesus is here with us.

I have been honored to worship with you all over these past nine months as a Ministry-in-Context student, and you have on many Sunday mornings, reminded me that Christ is present with me by shaking my hand and wishing me peace. This is always a place of welcome, no matter how many doubts and questions I bring through the door with me.

But even more than the Peace, the part of Sunday morning worship at IPLC during which I have most been reminded of Christ’s real presence among us is during communion.

I had never been a communion assistant or assisting minister until I came here to IPLC. In the beginning, I was nervous. But over the weeks, I started to feel more comfortable... then I started to notice that communion was often the most moving part of the service for me. More than once it even brought me to tears.

I love the joy with which this congregation – especially the children! – come up to receive communion. I love that your practice is to serve communion over the font, which means we actually reach out our hands to take communion. We reach out our hands to grasp the *body* of Christ.

Usually when I help with communion, I hold one of the cups, but last week, on Easter, I had the privilege of distributing bread, to say to each person, “the *body* of Christ – given for you.”

Lutherans proclaim that Christ is present with us in communion – in a real way, not just a symbolic way. I am deeply comforted by the reality that even when I don’t feel faithful enough, even when I experience doubt – Christ is still present to me here at the Table. Martin Luther once said that communion is a stretcher: it can *carry* us.

We know that the real presence of Christ is true because Jesus said it was true. Jesus was clear with his followers before his death and after his resurrection that his presence with his followers was not contingent: it was forever.

I can’t say that this real presence is something I *understand* in the sense that I have doubt-free *certainty*. Instead, it’s something I understand in the sense that I have *faith*; I trust that God’s promises are always sure. Like Thomas, I proclaim Jesus is “my Lord and my God.”

Friends, if this resurrection season finds you with doubts and questions, then peace be with you. You are welcome. You are not alone. Christ comes back for us, again and again, because we are all of us, even the doubters, God’s beloved.