

Doubting Thomas
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John 20:19-31 CEB
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Medford UMC, NJ

How does the phrase go, “seeing is believing?” Yeah, that doesn’t quite work here, does it? In today’s text, we see the disbelief of the disciple, Thomas. Though Thomas doesn’t recognize Christ until he sees Christ’s scars, Jesus’ body not completely healed in resurrection interestingly enough, Christ argues, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.” Yes, that’s surely why they call it faith. One of Merriam-Webster’s dictionary definitions of faith is a, “firm belief in something for which there is no proof”. But let’s be honest with ourselves – how often are we looking for some tangible proof, our own burning bush, our own ray of light from heaven – why do you think we fall prey to constantly trying to find proof in miracles, in experiences, in potato chips that sort-of look like Jesus. We may be a little more like Thomas than we’re ready to admit – knowing that having faith means believing without the tangible proof, yet still wanting that conclusive signature on it.

Scholars actually argue that Thomas is wrongly given a bad name, he’s even been given the nickname of “Doubting Thomas”. We need to cut Thomas a little slack here though. He was missing from this gathering, so he’s late to being caught up to what’s happening, but he’s doing exactly what the others did earlier. The women told some of the disciples about Christ’s resurrection, they didn’t believe the women, and it wasn’t until Jesus appeared to them and showed them His scars that they did believe. Now they’ve told Thomas and Thomas is refusing to believe until he gets the same proof as the rest of the disciples did. They were no different, so why does Thomas get all the heat? Also, our modern ears and translations have led us to often read this text in a way that it almost sounds like Jesus is shaming Thomas for his disbelief. This couldn’t be further from the truth! If Jesus didn’t want Thomas to have the tangible proof he desired, then why did He visit and give him just that? No. The disciples do get an eyewitness account, knowing that future generations won’t so the resurrection is where the story for them really begins, it’s where their being Christ in the world really matters. And that’s what we’re going to talk about today: recognizing Christ in the day-to-day world, having the kind of faith where we actually can see Christ at work – maybe not as a guy in white robes with crucifixion scars joining us for dinner, but the kind of faith where Christ is found without that. Two thoughts on where we see that in our lives:

1) God appears to us through life.

Springtime in a location like the East Coast that has all 4 seasons may be one of the most visceral times to be able to experience this. Step outside and your senses will be filled with new life: the sounds of birds’ melodies, the smell of flowers and freshly cut grass, the taste of newly harvested fruits and vegetables, the feeling of the sun’s warmth hitting your skin, the sight of blooming greenery amongst once dead-looking trees. Everything screams new life!

Verses 21 and 22 read: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’ Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Breath being the ultimate sign of life. The phrasing is actually similar to the creation story itself. The resurrected body of Christ, breathing on them – just think about that for a moment. Now this may be a little nerve-racking to think about at this mask-infused moment, the literal last thing we want is for anyone to be breathing on us. Step six feet back, please! But Jesus is, in essence, proving the life still within Him through breath and is using that breath to wash over, no, saturate the disciples in the Holy Spirit for their work, their callings to proclaim the gospel throughout the world. God is tangibly with us through the breath of life that works through us when we live out God’s work in the world, through the burst of life that comes from inspiration and empathy.

In her poem, “Oxygen”, Pulitzer Prize winner, Mary Oliver, writes about the breath’s gift to not only our bodies but our souls. She writes:

Everything needs it: bone, muscles, and even,
while it calls the earth its home, the soul.
So the merciful, noisy machine

stands in our house working away in its
lung-like voice. I hear it as I kneel
before the fire, stirring with a

stick of iron, letting the logs
lie more loosely. You, in the upstairs room,
are in your usual position, leaning on your

right shoulder which aches
all day. You are breathing
patiently; it is a

beautiful sound. It is
your life, which is so close
to my own that I would not know

where to drop the knife of
separation. And what does this have to do
with love, except

everything? Now the fire rises
and offers a dozen, singing, deep-red
roses of flame. Then it settles

to quietude, or maybe gratitude, as it feeds
as we all do, as we must, upon the invisible gift:
our purest, sweet necessity: the air.

The air as our purest, sweetest necessity, and a tangible way our faith embodies itself in the world. Us, being able to tangibly experience God through the breath of the Holy Spirit amidst our work and amidst our very environment.

2) God appears to us through forgiveness.

Forgiveness is always a rough subject, yet it is the core of the whole Christ event: us being forgiven, undeservingly, for sins we seem to keep committing. Even when we know better, there we are, doing it again. Out of what seems like no-where, after offering them the breath of the Holy Spirit to move through them in their callings, Jesus gives them a quick lesson in forgiveness. Random! In verse 23, Jesus says: "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." Where did this come from? Who do they need to forgive? Judas, maybe? Themselves, maybe? Perhaps Jesus knows that on their journey of spreading the Good News, they're going to have to really embody forgiveness or else they're not going to get anywhere. Living out a calling from God is messy, doing ministry is messy and forgiveness is a necessity in that. Jesus' statement is actually reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer we say weekly: "Forgive us our trespasses as we for those who trespass against us." It almost makes it sound like a chain-link fence, each individual bolted to the next. God starts this cycle of forgiveness, but it works best when everyone participates. A lack of forgiveness can keep us bolted together in an extremely detrimental way.

This is the imagery that Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber uses to describe her understanding and experience of forgiveness. She says that when someone hurts us, it creates this chain between us and them, and that forgiveness isn't just sort of stepping back and letting people off the hook for what they've done – quite the opposite. It's a divine trait of freedom gifted to us from God to offer others. Resentment or gripping tight to the wrongs people have done against us doesn't actually fight against evil, she says, but actually runs the risk of us absorbing that wrong – we become the worst parts of them when we refuse to truly and fully forgive them. She describes forgiveness as the act of breaking that chain that links us to the wrong-doer, it disconnects us from wrong and sin, it allows us to be, as she calls it, a “freedom fighter” and as Nadia says, “free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past, free people laugh more than others, free people see beauty where others do not, free people are not easily offended.”

So when we find ourselves in Thomas's shoes which, unfortunately we're probably there more than we'd like to admit; where we want some tangible proof, something that will squash the doubt that creeps into us when our prayers aren't answered the way we want, or tragedy strikes, or we experience pain that seems to be without good reason – look toward forgiveness. Look at God's ability to not just overcome but disconnect from evil, and then hand us the bolt-cutters to do the same. See how God's actions and sacrifice gifts us freedom – the freedom to not be weighed down by the past, by what ways we've been hurt, by the ways we've hurt others, and to say, “No, you know what? I refuse it's hold on me.”

So as we go from this day, moving away from the Easter event into a spring filled with laughter, and greenery, and breath, and forgiveness, and even some sense of normalcy – see the proof that God is eagerly offering you this day. The kindness of a neighbor, the deer that keep eating your tulips, and through the gift to disconnect ourselves from wrong through forgiveness.