

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43: 10-11
SECOND LESSON: John 20:19-31
April 24, 2022

“To Doubt Is Normal”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

This event occurred on the evening of the first Easter. Mary Magdalene had already told the other disciples she had seen the Lord early that morning. They didn't believe her. *Mary must be delusional*, they concluded. Now it was their turn. The doors were locked. The disciples were afraid that the Jewish leadership would be after them next. They may have been planning their next move—how to disappear quietly, and at the same time how to cope with such crushing loss. Their entire world had just imploded. This was a deeply frightened and grief struck group. They had been together through thick and thin with Jesus, and they stayed together, all except for two people. Judas was no longer one of them. He had betrayed them all. And Thomas was attending to business elsewhere.

The doors were locked, and yet suddenly Jesus was there standing among them. “Peace be with you!” he said. He showed them his hands and side to prove that it was really him. They were overjoyed! What on earth was going to come next?! Were armies from heaven about to converge on the earth and drive the Romans out? But it was not that simple. What came next involved their direct and costly participation. They were commissioned. Once more Jesus said, “Peace be with you!” but he added, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” This is a very mysterious and complicated turn of affairs, and these events have been interpreted many ways.

First of all, as we said last week, Jesus' resurrected body was both like ours and not like ours. Paul speaks of the resurrection body in I Corinthians in this way: “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44) Clearly resurrection bodies are not the same as the bodies we possess now. We just have to be a bit careful with the word “spiritual,” however, because we're not talking about a ghost. Jesus wasn't some floating phantom. He was very solid and real, and showed them the evidence of that fact. As to how he could get through locked doors and move through time and space at will, that is something we have no answers for because it belongs to another reality, one we have not yet entered.

We don't know how long Jesus spent with the disciples, or how he parted with them, but his instructions after breathing on them were daunting to say the least. Traditionally the Roman Catholic Church interpreted this passage concerning the power to forgive sins or withhold forgiveness as belonging to the papacy. These concepts took centuries to develop and the Eastern Church never accepted the Western Roman Church's claims. This is one of the roots of the concept of excommunication, however. And it was clearly understood in the Middle Ages that if Mother Church cut you off, you couldn't go to Father. You were headed straight for hell. Even Presbyterians have retained some form of excommunication, but it only happens in extreme cases and is not understood to be actually denying a person salvation, just membership. Perhaps all of this misses the point, however.

Sin at this level means deliberately rejecting Christ. And here I offer you my opinion. It is only my opinion. I have no proof to go by other than the nature of God. I do not believe that this type of rejecting Christ is the same thing as being repelled by a particularly aggressive form of evangelism and walking out the door. (Or as happened recently, being uncomfortable while trapped on an airplane as well-intentioned young Christians start leading praise songs mid-flight.) I believe it means to truly encounter Christ who is pure love and goodness, and to reject him. It means to choose darkness and self-glorification over light and humility. And people do that. Twisted lies are often much more attractive than truth. As God's servants we are called to proclaim the truth about God in our words and in our actions. No one really knows what "not forgiving" in the name of Christ entails, but perhaps it is just a recognition of the facts. Someone has walked away. They have chosen to reject God, not because they have misunderstood, not because the gospel was presented in an abusive environment, and not because the only Christians they were exposed to were hypocrites. They have seen God clearly, and rejected God decisively. When someone does that, we place them in God's hands and let go.

There is also much debate about what the Holy Spirit being breathed into the disciples on this occasion means. Is this John's form of "Pentecost"? I would have to say no, because the disciples were not immediately empowered to go forth and proclaim as they were on the day of Pentecost. They were still timid, still a bit unsure. This giving of the Holy Spirit may have been an act of divine healing and restoration. There is only one Spirit, but the Spirit can act in many different ways.

Jesus did not appear again for a full week. Imagine how confused the disciples would have been! It's at this point I think they would have begun to pour over the scriptures looking in the prophets for an explanation for what was happening. But Thomas was not there, and Thomas would not believe them when they said they had seen the Lord. It's not that Thomas was a hardcore skeptic. Thomas was a deep and faithful believer. He had expected to die with Jesus. His commitment was absolute, and therefore when Jesus died, his faith was shattered. Thomas has been given a very hard time throughout history for saying, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." But that is exactly the evidence that Jesus had shown the other disciples, and they

no doubt told him that! He wasn't asking for special treatment. He was asking for the same treatment.

Jesus knew what Thomas had said. As part of God he knew exactly what Thomas had said and what was in Thomas' heart. So a week later when they were all gathered again with the doors locked, this time Thomas with them, Jesus came and spoke directly to him. "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Astonished and beside himself, Thomas didn't need to do any of that. He said, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus did not condemn Thomas for doubting, and he does not condemn us for doubting. Instead, he encouraged Thomas, saying, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The human response to trauma is to hunker down, to withdraw and hide. That is exactly what the disciples were doing. It's normal. And doubt is also normal. God gave us the capacity for critical thinking. There are enough gullible people in the world believing bizarre things they read on the internet right now! We need more, not less, critical thinking. All Christians experience doubt. It doesn't matter who they are. I am sure that the late Billy Graham experienced doubt. It's part of our make-up, not a moral failing. What it takes to navigate doubt is not certitude, but humility. Faith is not being certain about everything, and it is not knowing everything. Faith still has questions. I gain more faith every time I see that God is still with me in times of trial, but I can't even pretend to understand the resurrection and how God has put the universe together. Faith is not the same thing as blind belief. Faith is trusting God even when we don't understand.

The late Dr. Wayne Dyer wrote a wonderful parable that I think says it all:

In a mother's womb were two babies. One asked the other: "Do you believe in life after delivery?"

The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later."

"Nonsense" said the first. "There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?"

The second said, "I don't know, but maybe there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can't understand now."

The first replied, "That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery is to be logically excluded."

The second insisted, "Well I think there is something and maybe it's different than it is here. Maybe we won't need this physical cord anymore."

The first replied, "Nonsense. And moreover if there is life, then why has no one has ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere."

“Well, I don’t know,” said the second, “but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us.”

The first replied “Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That’s laughable. If Mother exists then where is She now?”

The second said, “She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her this world would not and could not exist.”

Said the first: “Well I don’t see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn’t exist.”

To which the second replied, “Sometimes, when you’re in silence and you focus and you really listen, you can feel Her presence, and you can hear Her loving voice, calling down from above.” Amen.

Isaiah 43: 10-11

¹⁰ “You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord,
“and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.

¹¹ I, even I, am the Lord,
and apart from me there is no savior.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.