
“Seeing is Believing?”

A SERMON on John 20:19-31 for the 2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C
Preached 24 April 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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“If only...” a Nobel-prize-winning author, once wrote,

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.¹

The author in question was a man named Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn had experienced first-hand the forced labour camps of the Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin, those camps known as the “Gulags”. And although he mostly wrote novels, he spent much of the 1960s piecing his experience as a Gulag prisoner together with interviews, diaries, and more into *The Gulag Archipelago*, a three-volume work of non-fiction in which he chronicles that reality. It is in the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* that Solzhenitsyn makes his stunning observation: “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

I confess that I admire Solzhenitsyn’s clarity of insight and depth of wisdom. After enduring the sorts of evils embodied by the Soviet Gulags, it could be easy, I would think, to have a more vengeful and *revengeful* outlook about people. To reject any sort of black-and-white, yes-no, good-bad dichotomy, at least when it comes to people, *that* takes a certain kind of maturity of spirit, doesn’t it (?), to be able to honestly face that dividing line between good and evil—right where it cuts through your own soul.

Couldn’t we say the same thing about faith? All too often, we think that faith is this yes-or-no, on-or-off, either you have it or you don’t sort of thing. But the truth is, the line dividing faith and doubt cuts through the heart of every human being, each one of us. Each of us is a complicated mix of belief and unbelief, trust and fear, faith and doubt.

Those of us who have heard and re-told this story about Thomas that we hear in the gospel of John, we’ve often tended to give Thomas a bit of a bad rap. Oh, there’s “Doubting Thomas” again. As a convenient shorthand, some people even call this Sunday “Doubting Thomas Sunday”, since for those of us who follow the historic patterns of the church year, this passage from John chapter 20 is *always* the gospel reading on the Sunday after Easter. “Doubting Thomas” language even leaks out into our ways of talking outside of church occasionally, whenever some chronically skeptical soul gets called a “doubting Thomas”.

Plenty of people have pointed out that Thomas simply wanted the same thing that all the others had already gotten, that chance they had to see the resurrected Jesus up-close-and-personal. And that’s why we shouldn’t be so hard on Thomas, those people would claim. But you know... There’s another reason it’s probably not fair to single Thomas out as “the doubter.” It isn’t just that the others had already gotten the visible proof that Thomas demanded. Rather, Thomas isn’t the only doubter in this story.

¹ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 168; quoted in George Bryant Wirth’s commentary on Acts 4:32-35 for the Second Sunday of Easter in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Vol. 2 – Lent through Eastertide, ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 385.

In the aftermath of what is supposed to be the greatest triumph of all time, the most glorious moment in our Christian story—the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning—where did we find the disciples as our scripture reading opened this morning? That’s right: Locked away in a room, cowering in fear. And even after most of the group had seen Jesus, a week later they are still shut up in that same house. So, really, perhaps we shouldn’t call this the story of Doubting Thomas so much as the story of the Doubting Disciples.

Either way, though, whether we’re focused on Thomas alone or all of the disciples, realizing that doubt was running like a high voltage power line strung across the landscape of their lives—at least in those first days right after Jesus’ resurrection... *either way*, doubting Thomas or doubting disciples... that’s not necessarily something to give them a bad rap for. Doubt and faith are not opposites, with one bad and one good, doubt to be ridiculed and faith to be praised. Doubt, in fact, is a natural part of faith itself. After all, to have “faith” isn’t to simply believe things you can *prove* to be true... those are simply facts, what we call “knowledge”. Nor does having “faith” mean believing in things you can prove are *not* true... that’s simply foolishness. No, wrestling with doubt and uncertainty, with the “dark night of the soul” when you’re simply not sure what you believe but simply lay yourself bare depending on the mercy of the God whom you hope you can trust, those are all a part of the life of faith. From Jacob wrestling with the angel to Elijah hiding in a cave to Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane pleading with God for “this cup” to be taken from him, from the very beginning we’ve witnessed the people of God holding faith not *despite* doubt but in the midst of it.

After all, at the end of the day, the story—the great story of God and God’s dealings with us—isn’t first and foremost about us. It’s about God. Perhaps the story we’ve heard this morning shouldn’t be called the story of Doubting Thomas *or* the story of the Doubting Disciples, but instead the story of the Jesus who keeps coming back.

Although last week we heard from Luke’s version of the Easter story, I imagine that many of you will also remember the account that the gospel of John tells. In John’s telling, the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, who mistakes him for a gardener, and calls her by name. She goes and tells the news. But still, as we heard in today’s reading, the disciples that night are locked in a room, full of fear. And so Jesus appears once more. That’s *still* not enough, apparently, and so even a week later, with the disciples still shut up in the house along with Thomas who has yet to see, Jesus appears yet again. He keeps coming back. He keeps appearing to those who need assurance.

There at the end of the passage from John, we heard the gospel writer tells us that Jesus “did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.” My friends, the truth is, those signs continue. The risen Christ keeps coming back, doing other signs in the presence of his disciples... that is, in *our* presence. Us, his disciples still, today. Those further signs of resurrection life are not written in the book because they’re *still* happening among us. As we witness those tokens of God’s victory among us, can we come to belief yet again?

Indeed, I do think that coming to belief, coming to faith, it is always a ‘yet again’ sort of thing. We are ever and ever again given the chance to meet Jesus again for the first time. We are ever and ever again given the opportunity to trust. We are ever and ever again met by that line between doubt and faith, that line that runs deeply through our souls...

But in meeting that line, we also discover God’s blessing. After all, the story we have heard ultimately is not a story of judgment on poor old Thomas, but rather a story of blessing on us. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

That, of course, my friends, is us.

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.