

John 20:19-29
Try Me!
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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I want to begin, once again, by offering my greeting to you this morning, and say how good it is to be back with you in this way. Now for those of you who have grown accustomed to Mark, or maybe there might be someone who began coming during the period in which he led, or maybe you just have a short memory, my name is Jonathan Cornell. It's nice to meet you.

And as many of you are well aware, we are in the midst of a season in our congregation where there has been tremendous turmoil and grief, something none of us was prepared for. It has felt for me, and I would guess many of you too, like our world and our life together has been turned upside down and shaken...violently. This continues to be a time in which the kids and I are learning what life will look like in this new, and frankly unimaginable season. A thought that seems too unbelievable to imagine, and yet here we are.

Briefly, I want to express in sincerest terms the depth of gratitude the kids and I feel towards all of you. In his letters in the New Testament Paul frequently expresses in deep and heartfelt ways the love he has for the churches who have supported him in his missionary journeys and in his imprisonments. That depth of love is what I feel toward you, and toward this community. Whether it was in the form of a card written, a meal prepared, a cup of coffee shared with a friend in which you offered comfort to one another, or gathering in this space to be reminded of preciousness of life and the supreme comfort and hope we find in the cross and resurrection, I cherish the life of this community and this congregation.

So where do we go from here? How do we move forward in this new reality in which we now live?

I've been thinking a lot about this in the last few weeks, struggling to know how to speak. What does God want us to hear? Since part of what my role here is, is speaking to you about God and faith, that question: "where do we begin?" has weighed very heavily on my mind and on my heart.

Well, seems there are a few directions we could go. 1. We could talk about the thing that many of us are feeling very acutely, and that's grief. Sometimes grief can feel like a garment that we wear, a garment that becomes increasingly more familiar and comfortable, so that grieving becomes normal to us. The Scriptures have a lot to say about grief, they speak very poetically and sometimes tenderly to grieving people. However, books like Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, also capture in words how gut-wrenching life can be, how blindly unfair and heartlessly cruel this sin-riddled world can be. Sometimes it can feel as though our sadness and our suffering is completely random and without explanation. To which the bible can answer back: "yeah, pretty much."

We would perhaps do well to talk about that.

Another direction we could go would be to focus on the gift of what we celebrated one week ago, the hope of resurrection. We could set aside the experiences of the last few months and say together, hallelujah, Christ is risen, God is alive. Sin and death and disease and sadness lose, and we win because Jesus was victorious. Hallelujah! Now of course I'm being a little tongue in cheek,

because in reality all of this is true. At the cross all of these things were defeated and on Easter morning the resurrected Jesus reveals that hope and love and life is victorious. All of this is true, but at the very same time there may still a hole in our lives, a pretty big one, for which we still feel deeply.

I want to tell you all that I have struggled deeply with these two poles, unsure if it was better to reflect on one or the other. When in reality what I feel—and there are no doubt others here within the sound of my voice who also understand—the paradox of competing emotions, which are both true and real, right now!

If you understand or can relate to this experience of life in tension, I want to emphatically express to you that the Scriptures understand and speak tenderly to people who struggle. That there is a place, not only here in this community, but in the pages of the Bible itself for people who wrestle with faith. And what we will come to see over the next 8 weeks is much of the Christian life is lived in this tension.

Imagine with me two great pillars, like the two great foundations that give the Golden Gate Bridge its strength. And these two pillars give the bridge its strength. Likewise, there are two great pillars of history that give our story its foundation. On one end it's the pillar that reads: "In the beginning." And on the other pillar: "The day of Christ Jesus." One marks the origin story, and the other tells of the great hope and consolation that will take place when Jesus Christ returns to bring a fulfillment of all things, drawing all peoples to himself. And throughout the scripture we see time and again the experience of life in tension between two places. The already of Jesus Christ bodily raised from the dead, and the not yet continuing to live together here and now in a broken world. Mourning and loss and pain, and resurrection hope. Haunting and nagging doubt, and resolute hope and courageous faith.

And like a pendulum swinging between the two ends, we must learn to navigate the space between these two realities of life. So, for the next 8 weeks I will spend time each week drawing our focus to important stories in Scripture in which we can see people who, like us, navigate these tensions of life.

This morning we are going to look at a story, that follows immediately on the heels of the Easter Story. And you will see that even in the face of the greatest good news the world has ever heard, there is still a place for those who doubt. I want to invite Becky Perry to come forward and read for us this morning's Gospel text.

John 20:19-29

All four gospels tell of this account, it is evening on the first day of the week—Sunday—and many of Jesus' followers are gathered together behind a locked door because they were afraid. There was one who was missing though, Thomas was not there. Maybe Thomas was someone who liked to be sad alone. Whatever the reason he is not there when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples on the evening of the first day. Perhaps he was parking the car, or maybe the other disciples sent him out on a Starbuck's run. Whatever the case when Thomas arrives the other disciples say to him, "he's not here, sorry you just missed him."

But when the disciples start to explain to him what happened do you see what it says in verse 25? **“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”**

They all had confidence and were excited that Jesus was alive, but Thomas did not. So, for all of history since then Thomas is known to us as, what? Doubting Thomas. This seems then to suggest that all of the other disciples had unwavering faith at all times, and there was one who doubted sometimes. Thomas. Right? Are you tracking with me?

We tend to think that the apostles all believed without any questioning, except for Thomas, and that's what made them apostles. But what you will see is that, while John is the only Gospel that tells the story of Thomas, all of the other accounts reveal that the disciples had a hard time believing the news.

In Mark, on Easter morning Mary Magdalene has an encounter with Jesus and then goes to tell the other disciples, but they would not believe it. Mark 16 Jesus appears to two men in the country and they go to tell others, but they would not believe it. In Luke, the women who met Jesus at the grave reported to the others: **“but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”** Then on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples who walk 7 miles with Jesus, and get a bible study from Jesus don't recognize him, because that's how strong their doubt is. Then in Matthew the disciples go to the mountain to await the risen Jesus and when he arrives here's what it says in chapter 28:17 **“When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.”**

Do you hear that? Apparently doubt in the risen Jesus was not uncommon.

We think the reason that that they believed in the resurrection because they didn't know about science and weren't as enlightened or as smart as we as we are. No, they struggled with it, because in their experience, dead people tend to stay dead. He wasn't, like Miracle Max said, “Mostly Dead.” He was all dead, and people like that don't come back to life.

The question this story presents to us is not, is the resurrection difficult to believe in? But rather, when a person finds themselves in that place of tension between doubt and faith, what should they do with their doubt? Do you see this very real struggle, the tension of earnestly seeking, but still having doubts? There may even be people in this room today that know this feeling well. Like the pendulum swinging back and forth between doubt and faith.

There are a few responses that people who struggle with faith might have. They might...

1. Tell themselves, I really do believe, even though they don't, and push out their doubt. Not being true to themselves.
2. Hide how you really feel so you don't let on that you doubt. Not being true to others
3. I'm going to be honest with myself and others and so because I'm different I'm going to leave, because I must not belong.

But what this morning's text reveals to us is a person who is not only weighed down by his grief, but struggles with his doubt. Thomas and the other disciples respond in a way that I believe can help us navigate our difficult times and times of uncertainty.

When we struggle with grief and with doubt, the questions we can ask today of this text is: What should we do with it? What can we learn from Thomas

1 Show up. Thomas shows up. Verse 26 says: **Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them.**

One of the tempting responses to trauma, to heartbreak, to grief is to say to ourselves, I am angry and confused, and wounded, and instead of seeking the care of the Father, like an injured child would we lash out in our woundedness. But Thomas doesn't isolate for long and remain disconnected in his grief. Thomas shows up. And can we just say, for someone who is hurt, for someone who has doubts, for someone who for one reason or another may not feel as though they have a place in the community of faith, it takes a lot of courage for Thomas to come back, to show up in his struggle.

When we are wounded, when we hurt it is so easy for us to hide, to nurse our wounds and to isolate. In the weeks after Amy's death the elders gave to me a great gift, a leave of absence. And I found myself having to answer a question I've not had the luxury of asking for about 10 years now. Should I go to church, and if I should, where? Should I stay home and catch up on sleep? Should I go somewhere I can be totally anonymous?

But for me, and for Thomas, it was here in the community of faith, in the weekly gathering to celebrate the resurrection, it was—as it will say in Acts “in the breaking of bread and of prayers” where hope and comfort and peace is found. Even though it was very difficult. When you face crises in your life, I want to say to you that the very best place you can go, the very best place you can be is in the community of faith. And for those of you disciples who do not struggle with doubt, or whom things in life are relatively smooth, remember that there are always those among you for whom this may not be easy.

2. This is a lesson for the Church around people who are hurting: Continue to bear witness. **“We have seen the Lord.”**

The following week, when the disciples have again gathered and Thomas is with them, they say to Thomas, “we have seen the Lord.” Here's the lesson, and this one is for the community of faith, or for those who are not struggling with their grief and doubt. Don't change or adapt what you believe in or how you worship because there are those among us who may have doubts. And don't withhold the good news, even when it's hard, because someone may be sad.

The temptation might be to say: “you know, it's pretty hard for people to believe in the resurrection, so let's not talk about that when we get together. We don't want to offend anyone who doesn't believe like us, so let's not be too definite about the things we believe that are hard to believe.” This is the wrong approach, because we do not help anyone if we get together and pretend we don't believe what we do believe because we don't want to make others uneasy.

What we see here is that one-week later Thomas shows up to the second church service ever, even though he has doubts. And in this community the others celebrated the resurrection while he remained skeptical—and that was ok. There was space for that. The other disciples were not scared by his questions, but made space for him to seek. They were also totally authentic in rejoicing in the knowledge and the evidence they had that Jesus, their teacher and master was not dead, but alive.

They did not freak out at Thomas' doubt, nor did they immediately try and change his mind because of an insecurity they had. The disciples gathered for worship and celebration, authentically and honestly, and in their midst was someone who doubted or who struggled, and that is ok.

3. In a community of faith that continues to worship and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and is not scared of people who have doubts, who are not scared of people who are sad or hurting—even if that person happens to be their pastor—but who trust in Jesus and embrace them with kindness and compassion, do you know what always happens? Jesus shows up. Jesus shows up.

The disciples gathered to celebrate one week later, Thomas came to be with them even though he had doubts, the disciples were not freaked out by Thomas' doubts, and when Thomas was honest with what he needed to see and feel in order to believe, what happens? Jesus shows up.

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

It is as if Jesus, to the one in the room who struggled most with what was going on, says “Try me.” You, Thomas, have been honest with your struggle, you have been honest in telling me what you need in order to believe (Unless I see the mark and feel the holes, I will not believe...). Thomas, go ahead and try me out. Put your finger here, see my hands. Jesus took Thomas, the empiricist, Thomas the materialist, Thomas the Skeptical Scientist and he didn't say, really Thomas here's how it works, here are the scientific methods of this. No, he come to the skeptic with the same news and presence he brought all the others, and said. Try me.

And when Thomas puts his hand in Jesus' side, he responds with the strongest profession of faith in all the New Testament. Thomas is the only one who says unequivocally, “My Lord, and My God.”

Jesus came to Thomas, because he was willing to show up in his grief and in his doubt, and be among disciples who didn't modify the message, but who celebrated what they had seen one week before. And Jesus honored Thomas' questions, because he knew he was an earnest seeker.

Doubt is not the absence of faith, it's also not weak faith, doubt can be the prelude to deep and abiding faith and the presence of the resurrected Jesus.

One of the things that I will do briefly over the course of the next few weeks, months, years, is taking time regularly in this setting to give you an update

I am hurting, I am sad, I am confused, disoriented. But I am also committed to showing up. If you ask me out for coffee, or over for dinner, or out for a beer—yes I do that—in as much as I can with 3 young children, I will be there. I am going to those places, I am having those conversations. I will talk about the iridescent beauty and radiance of Amy with anyone who will listen because it is helping me to make sense and process through my sadness. I will weep, I will laugh, I will sit in stunned silence because it still feels so unbelievable that it can't possibly be true. And I know, the comforter, the Holy Spirit will be there with us.

This week a friend came over to the house to visit and as we sat at the kitchen table over a pot of coffee, we talked about Amy. And in the course of a 45-minute conversation we laughed, we

marveled, we wept, we mourned, we wondered. This is the experience of living in tension between the beginning, and the day of Christ when all will be resolved. Our joy is tinted with sadness; our hope is grounded in suffering; our sorrow yoked with resounding peace; our faith is accompanied by doubt. Do you see how the hope of the Gospel enables us to live more fully present in this world as witnesses to that good news precisely because of Jesus raised from the dead. Because we understand the tension of living in a world in which Christ is risen, and yet his return is still before us. As we wait and live hopefully in him we steward the experiences and emotions of living in the tension.

John Broyles, Doubting Thomas

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus we come to you this morning longing, hoping for, needing your risen presence to be known to us. Lord it is true that for so many of us, we may have more of Thomas in us than we like to admit. And yet we praise you, that in the Sunday gathering you did not push Thomas out, nor did you minimize his worries and doubts. But like the tender, resolute father that you are, you met his doubts head on, and here today you come to us and meet our experiences of grief and longing and hopes head on. Help us to continue to earnestly seek you where you may be found.

Holy Spirit we ask that you would come to us in the ways in which we need you today. For we know that there are those in our midst and loved ones who this week have received news of an diagnosis, endured the difficulty and heartache of relationships coming to an end, family members who make decisions that are not healthy to them or their loved ones. God, we know and understand all too well the challenges to our faith that this life can present. Through it all, comforting Spirit, we ask for your presence to be known.

For our nation and for our leaders, we ask for you to give clarity and focus and direction so that they might pursue what is right and good for its citizens.

And we pray for your church as it gathers around the world to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We pray for the Thomas' everywhere who are honestly seeking, and ask that you, Jesus, would continue to show up and reveal yourself to us, that we might say together "my Lord, my God."

Hear now, we ask, the prayers we lift to you as we gather them into the prayer you taught us to pray saying...