

## Easter 2A 2020 Sermon

### *John 20:19-31*

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."*

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Every year on Easter Sunday, we proclaim with great faith and conviction that Jesus is risen from the dead; and every year on the Sunday *after* Easter, we read about one of his disciples, Thomas, who will not believe the testimony of his fellow disciples that they have seen the resurrected Jesus. Thomas states that he himself needs to *see* and *touch* the risen Jesus before he will believe and trust.

Now, Christians have often dealt unkindly with Thomas, thinking that he was *faithless*. The term "doubting Thomas" is even found in Webster's dictionary, with the unflattering definition, "an incredulous or habitually doubtful person."

But I would like to suggest that this is unfair to Thomas. After all, the *other* disciples didn't believe the testimony of the women who had gone to the tomb that morning. The other disciples didn't believe until *they* saw the risen Christ with their **own** eyes – and Thomas is just asking for the same opportunity for empirical, experiential proof.

Now, many of us came to certain beliefs **about** God and about Jesus being raised from the dead through the *teachings* of our parents, our Sunday School teachers, our pastors or priests, or through the Bible. We accepted those teachings as

“truth” because we deeply trusted in the **authority** of our parents, Sunday School teachers, pastors or priests, or the Bible. Accepting something as true because some authority *tells* us it is true is what scholars call “the argument from authority.” The disciples who had gathered behind locked doors that first Easter evening did not accept the authority of the women who had been to Jesus’ tomb early that morning; so they did not accept as truth the women’s claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. *Thomas* did not accept the authority of his fellow disciples (they had not proven very *trustworthy*, after all), and so **he** could not accept as *truth* the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead, until he **himself** *experienced* Jesus risen from the dead: until he *saw* and *touched* Jesus’ wounds.

I once read an article which asserted that the scientific method came about in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War – a war between Protestants and Catholics in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century which became “one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in human history.”<sup>1</sup> In the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, “the venerable method of judging between competing claims to truth was this: Whatever the people in power *said* was true [was true. That’s the ‘argument from authority.’] That an *individual* saw or thought or reasoned something different did not matter. The men who created science believed that argument from authority *caused* the Thirty Years’ War, and they developed science so it could never happen again.”<sup>2</sup>

Anthropology Professor Peter Neal Peregrine, the author of that article, wrote: “When I was a new professor in the early 1990s teaching human evolution, I found myself pitted against creationists who believed God created humans exactly as we are today, without *any* process of evolution. Theirs was an argument from authority; specifically, the authority of the first two chapters of Genesis. I... tried to counter it with scientific facts.

“I realize now that my approach did not work because we were **not** *arguing* about the scientifically accepted facts. We were using different methods of judging what is and what is not a fact... [What is and is not true.]

“Empirical data carry little weight against an argument from authority.”<sup>3</sup>  
(unquote)

Now, Christian evangelists may try to convince people to believe that Jesus rose from the dead by appealing to the authority of the Bible, but the fact of the matter is that most of us come to believe in the risen Christ because we have *experienced* the life and love of the risen Christ (or “God,” or “the Holy Spirit,” or whatever name you choose to give this Reality). “Abstract ideology will not get us very far,” Richard Rohr writes, “and much common religion is ideology more than real encounter with [Divine] Presence. We all must start with our anecdotal **experience**, and then build from there...”<sup>4</sup> (unquote)

We start with our own, concrete **experience** of God: God’s love coming to us (often through another person); God’s life coming to us (from the depths of our

souls, or through prayer, or through some outward experience, or through Creation, or through the love of another person).

My friends, it is interesting to observe what kind of arguments we hear being made today, in light of these different kinds of arguments for truth. Empirical data is being given the upper hand, *at the moment*; but ideology and politics are making their voices heard, more and more loudly. We need to beware of seeing the realities of our present situation through the lens of our polarized politics. It should *not* be a matter of people who are suffering and dying from the coronavirus *vs.* people who are suffering economically. It should not be a choice of either/or, but both/and. Both sufferings are real.

I would like to suggest that, in their very efforts to seek the Real in our world, scientists (and I include economists, insofar as they follow scientific methods) are, in many cases, closer to the Christian faith than are those who are arguing from some authority (such as the Bible, or doctrine, or political ideology). I say this because the true scientist is not looking for any particular *outcome*; she is only looking for the truth. One of the beauties of the scientific method is that it is always humble: it proposes a hypothesis, tests it experimentally, and if it doesn't prove true, the scientist lets go of that hypothesis and goes on to another. I personally know a physicist who spent *years* developing an experiment (which became his PhD project) designed to discover some key fact about the universe. The data he and his team collected was so significant that the results were printed in leading science magazines and even in the secular press. Years later, however, it was discovered that his data could not be relied upon because of some dust or something else in the equipment which had been undetectable at the time. My friend took it in stride: his main concern had *never* been to gain prominence, but rather to get to the truth; and having his PhD conclusions proved unverifiable simply moved science one step closer to the truth.

How many staunch believers in some doctrine of faith or politics or ideology can let go of *their* beliefs as easily as my scientist friend if truth seems to be pointing in a different direction?

The great scientist Isaac Newton once said in regard to his prodigious and groundbreaking discoveries, "I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."<sup>4</sup> And Albert Einstein, whose work proved the *limits* of Newton's physics, said, "to know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms -- this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religion."<sup>5</sup>

Could we learn from these brilliant, humble scientists how to seek not to promote and promulgate our predetermined judgments, ideologies, and opinions, but rather

to humbly seek Reality and Truth? Rather than framing everything as either/or, to accept that Truth is very often both/and? To accept that Truth is sometimes a *process*, rather than a **destination**?

My friends, we often scorn those like Thomas, who doubt. But, as author Ann Lamott writes, “The opposite of faith is *not* doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”

My friends, in this uncertain time, may we have such humble faith.

AMEN

- <sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, “30 Years’ War”  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty\\_Years%27\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War)
- <sup>2</sup> *The Conversation*, Peter Neal Peregrine: “Seeking truth among ‘alternative facts,’” February 23, 2017 <https://theconversation.com/seeking-truth-among-alternative-facts-72733>
- <sup>3</sup> Peregrine, *ibid*.
- <sup>4</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/isaac\\_newton\\_387031](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/isaac_newton_387031)
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.quotes.net/quote/9265>