

Easter 2B 2018 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. And, as we see in today's Gospel, Jesus *provides* Thomas that opportunity; and in response, Thomas gives the strongest statement of faith in Jesus that we have in **all** the Gospels, saying, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now, Christians down through the centuries have tended to interpret that statement as a rebuke of Thomas for his lack of faith. The term "doubting Thomas" is even found in Webster's dictionary, with the definition, "an incredulous or habitually doubtful person." Yet, a number of contemporary Bible scholars have questioned that interpretation, saying that Jesus isn't *rebuking* **Thomas**; rather, he is simply giving a *blessing* and *encouragement* to all **future** Christians who come to trust in him without seeing him. I find that interpretation compelling, especially since, in the very next verse, John speaks directly to the

Christians who will be reading his Gospel in generations to come (like you and me!).

We just sang the hymn, “We walk by faith and not by sight.”¹ But I recently read a commentary by a chaplain at an Aeronautical University who asks, “what is wrong with walking by *both* [faith AND sight]?”² It’s an excellent question which, I have to tell you, I have never before encountered in my 28 years of studying scholarly commentaries on this passage! But we shouldn’t be too surprised at that, since, as we saw in our Friday night Lenten Studies, we Americans (along with most of Western civilization) tend to see things in a dualistic, either/or way. People are either *faithful* or *faithless*; we judge and label Thomas as *faithless*, and we fail to even consider other possibilities.

But I’d like us to consider today that chaplain’s question: What is wrong with walking by *both* faith *and* sight? After all, Christianity is the only religion that believes in the Incarnation of God – that God took material form and became human. Unlike Plato and the Gnostics, who dualistically saw “spirit” as good and “matter” as corrupt or bad, we Christians see the material world as inherently good, created by God and infused with God’s presence. God came to inhabit human flesh in Jesus, and *wherever* matter and Spirit come together, there we find the incarnate Christ. Richard Rohr writes: “The realization that the concrete opens us up to the universal might be the only fully trustworthy or possible path... because that is how we sensate humans operate.”³ We sensate humans – like Thomas – take in reality largely (though not exclusively!) through our senses. St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “Ever since God created the world, God's everlasting power and divinity--however invisible--are there for the mind to see in the things that God has made” (Romans 1:20). God is incarnate in, and revealed through, creation! *Nature* was God’s *first* Bible. “Abstract ideology will not get us very far,” Fr. 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. What else can we do?”⁴

We start with our personal, concrete experience of God. Is that not what Thomas was asking for? To experience the risen Christ for himself, like his fellow disciples had?

And putting trust in our experience and evidence is basically what scientists call “the scientific method.”

Recently, I read an article which asserts that the scientific method came about in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War – a war between Protestants and Catholics in the 17th Century which became “one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in human history.”⁵ In those days, “the venerable method of judging between competing claims to truth was this: Whatever the people in power *said* was true [was true. That’s what is called ‘argument from authority.’] That an *individual* saw or thought or reasoned something different did not matter. The

men who created science believed argument from authority *caused* the Thirty Years' War, and they developed science so it could never happen again.”⁶

Anthropology Professor Peter Neal Peregrine, the author of the article, writes: “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.”⁷

My friends, we see this phenomenon of competing ways of determining truth – either by appealing to authority or to empirical data – we see this being played out every day. Claims are being made from the authority of a particular ideology or politics or person in power; counter-claims are being made from the authority of a different ideology or politics or person in power; and scientifically verifiable data are being ignored. These days, claims from authority are, for some strange reason, assumed to be more compelling than evidence and data gathered by scientists, who are out of favor at this time, and are not given credence.

Yet in their very efforts to seek the Real in our world, scientists are, in many cases, closer to the Christian faith than those who are arguing from some authority (such as the Bible, or doctrine, or ideology). Richard Rohr writes, “Truth is One. If something is *spiritually* true, it will also be true in the **physical** world, and all disciplines and all religions will somehow be looking at this ‘one truth...’

“Big Truth is written in reality itself before it was ever written in books. If you say **yes** to Reality, to ‘what is,’ you will recognize the same truth when it shows itself in *anyone’s* sacred scriptures. If you do not respond to the ‘good, the true, and the beautiful’ ...in *daily reality*, I doubt if you will ever see it in the best Bible translation in the world. If it is the truth, it is true all the time and everywhere, and sincere lovers of truth will take it from wherever it comes... The important question is not, ‘Who said it?’ but, ‘Is it true?’”⁸

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) 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 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 could let go of their beliefs as easily as my scientist friend if truth seemed 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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰

Would that we could learn from these brilliant scientists how to seek not to promulgate our predetermined judgments, ideologies, and opinions, but rather to humbly seek Reality and Truth; to walk by faith AND by sight, and see that they are, in the end, One!

AMEN

¹ *Hymnal 1982* #209

² David Keck, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-03/sunday-april-27-2014>

³ Rohr, daily meditation, “One Sacred Universe,” Wednesday, June 14, 2017 <https://cac.org/one-sacred-universe-2017-06-14/>

⁴ Rohr, *ibid.*

⁵ Wikipedia, “30 Years’ War” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War

⁶ *The Conversation*, Peter Neal Peregrine: “Seeking truth among ‘alternative facts,’” February 23, 2017 <https://theconversation.com/seeking-truth-among-alternative-facts-72733>

⁷ Peregrine, *ibid.*

⁸ Rohr, *Truth Is One*, Daily Meditation, Tuesday, November 22, 2016, <https://cac.org/truth-is-one-2016-11-22/>

⁹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/isaac_newton_387031

¹⁰ <https://www.quotes.net/quote/9265>