

23 April 2017

Voices of Resurrection
John 20:19-29; John 21:1-17

We pick up where we left off last week, reading about Christ's resurrection appearances in the Gospel of John. Today we read first chapter 20, verses 19-29:

19 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.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.'

26 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.' ²⁷Then 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.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Last week, on Easter, we looked at two different Easter morning encounters with the Risen Christ. First, we examined that unknown, anonymous "disciple whom Jesus loved," who ran to the empty tomb and looked around, didn't understand what he was seeing, but believed anyway. Here, evidently, was someone for whom believing the improbable came naturally. Then we looked at Mary Magdalene, who saw the same thing that the Beloved Disciple saw but could only imagine that someone had stolen the body. Even when she encountered Jesus in person, all she saw was a gardener; it wasn't until he called her by name that she recognized him. In Mary, we see someone who didn't believe as easily. Maybe she'd believed in somebody before and had been hurt. In her case, the entry point to faith was relationship. For some reason, each person who encountered and recognized the Risen Christ did so differently. No one recognized him by physical appearance, or voice, but only in some way unique to that person.

Take Thomas, for instance, who was different from either the Beloved Disciple or Mary. Thomas is an ancient example of a very recognizable modern personality: the empiricist, the one who demands physical, tangible evidence. As we just read, on the evening of that first Easter, Jesus appeared to the disciples, who were hiding behind locked doors. They recognized him, but Thomas wasn't there. When the other disciples told him about it later, he said, *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.* That's the empiricist, demanding three physical tests by which to confirm their incredible report.

A week later, Jesus dropped in again, and this time Thomas was present. Jesus moved at once to Thomas, offering him the exact proof he'd requested. Now, I don't know how you imagine this scene, with Jesus telling him, "Here, put your finger here . . . and here," but I love the way the artist Caravaggio pictures it. He has Jesus actually grabbing Thomas's hand and shoving it into the wound in his side. "You want physical evidence? Touch me."



Then Jesus concluded, *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

Now the usual sermon on "Doubting Thomas" seizes on this last line and concludes that Thomas had a weak faith and that we should not be like that. I have a problem with that approach. You see, in my experience, the quest for empirical evidence is simply how some people's brains work. They're just wired that way. Maybe you know someone like that: someone who loves science experiments, who weighs every question based on the evidence of their own senses or the dependable laws of mathematics or physics. They like things for which there is a *right* answer and are impatient with more subjective things, like poetry and psychology. The Myers-Briggs personality profile distinguishes between those who are "Sensing" – that is, who seek evidence of the senses – and those who are "Intuiting," those who trust their gut feelings. Both are normal variants of the human psyche. The sensing, empirical mindset isn't a character flaw; it's a personality trait. In fact, it's often a strength. I want someone like that engineering the car I drive and the bridge I drive it over. I don't want my engine designed by someone's gut feeling, just like I don't want the EPA run by someone who just has a *feeling* that the climate scientists are all wrong.

Well, Thomas is an empiricist and probably always had been. It was how God designed him; so I won't say his doubting was a weakness. And I don't think Jesus did either. Yes, he did say, basically, that at some point Thomas was going to have to believe some things he couldn't prove, but he didn't lecture him. Instead, he spoke to him in the words that he would understand:

“Look and see.” Jesus accepted Thomas as he was. He gave him enough proof to show him that there *was* a reality beyond the senses, and it was enough. From what we hear of Thomas’s subsequent story – that he went on and took the good news as far as India – it would appear that he maintained his faith throughout his life. But I promise you this: even as he remained faithful, Thomas never stopped being skeptical, never stopped doubting, never stopped looking first for empirical evidence. He could no more stop thinking empirically than he could stop being Jewish.

There *is* such a thing as an empirical faith, and we have not done well by it. For centuries now, the Church has been uneasy with those horrid empiricists, who keep saying things that hurt our feelings: questioning miracles or doubting the historical accuracy of the Bible or wondering if there really is a God. By and large we’ve communicated to them that they had to shape up and stop thinking those thoughts or leave the church, and by and large they’ve left the church. This hasn’t served anyone very well. You see, not all empiricists are Richard Dawkins-like rabid atheists; many are irresistibly drawn to faith. Granted, theirs is a unique sort of faith, existing in an uneasy limbo between reluctant belief and nagging doubt, but it is faith. And there is a place for them here. Jesus had room for Thomas, and we should have room for his descendants today.

We continue John’s account of the Christ’s resurrection appearances, this time chapter 21, verses 1-17:

21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ ⁶He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ ¹⁶A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ ¹⁷He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt

because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.

So we've looked at Thomas, the empirical thinker. But not everyone is a thinker. Can I say that? I don't mean it as an insult. There are different kinds of intelligence than just thinking, and a lot of people who think a great deal are not very smart. I've been a university professor; trust me on this one. People just have different sorts of intelligence. The Beloved Disciple was an intuitive thinker, Mary a relational thinker, and Thomas an empirical thinker. And then there's Peter.

Now, Peter appears a lot in the Gospels and Acts, and every source offers a fairly consistent view of his personality. Let me try to illustrate with a few examples. Peter was one of Jesus' inner circle who was with him on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with Jesus. Seeing this, Peter immediately called out, "Lord, let me build three huts here, one for each of you, so we can just stay forever." The Gospel of Mark goes on to comment, "Peter said this because he didn't know what to say." (Pro tip here: When you don't know what to say, you can't go wrong by just not saying anything.) But that wasn't Peter. Peter spoke without thinking, and his response to the awe-inspiring presence of God was, "Can I build something?" Another example: when Jesus was arrested in the garden, Peter was the one who drew his sword and charged bravely against the crowds. Sure, it was certain death, but he was completely willing to die a useless death for Jesus. Fortunately, Jesus stopped him. But then he followed the crowd anyway. No, he didn't have a plan. And no, he accomplished nothing except saving his own skin by denying Christ three times, which had also not been a part of his plan. But he *did* follow. It was something to do. Finally, when Mary Magdalene told Peter and the Beloved Disciple about the empty tomb, Peter was the one who rushed there, dashed into the tomb, looked around cluelessly for a bit and then, you know, went home. Well, what was there to do? Peter needed something to *do*. You could say that Peter thought with his hands and feet rather than his brain, which is why he doesn't always look like the brightest oil lamp in the house. In fairness, though, it should probably be remembered that he was the one that Jesus chose as the foundation of his church.

In John 21, the Risen Christ appears to this man. By this time, Peter had gotten tired of sitting around – shocker, there – and had gone back to fishing, with some of the other disciples. They'd gone all night without catching anything, but as morning came, a man on the shore called out for them to try the other side of the boat. Immediately, their nets were filled with fish. The Beloved Disciple – remember him? The one who believes easily? – said, "It's the Lord," and Peter dove into the sea and started swimming, leaving the others to get the boats and fish to shore. Like I said, he's consistent.

And then we have this wonderful dialogue between Jesus and Peter. There's way more in this exchange than I'm going to take time for today, but in simple terms, Jesus asks Peter three times "Do you love me?" Three times, Peter vehemently affirms "Yes! I love you!" It seems clear that Jesus is giving Peter a chance to make a three-fold declaration of faith to cancel out his three-fold denial of Christ. It is a practical and beautiful gift of restoration. But here's what I want to note today. After each of Peter's affirmations, "You *know* I love you!" Jesus gives him a task. "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." Once again, the Risen Christ has appeared to one of his disciples and has spoken to him in exactly the way that that disciple is

most able to hear and understand. In Peter's case, it was all about action. Do you love me? Then here's what I want you to *do*.

The accounts of the Risen Christ are often puzzling, and the gospel-writers make no effort to explain. Jesus was physical, could be touched, could even eat, but locked doors were no barrier to him, and he wasn't recognizable by sight. Instead, he appeared to be recognized by different people in completely different ways. This is still the case. None of us experience the Risen Christ the same way. But this is a part of the glory of the resurrection. It is, in fact, for everyone. Christ is risen for the doubter and the doer, for the thinker and the not-so-much-of-a-thinker, for the introvert and the extrovert, for the one whose deepest need is a task and the one whose deepest need is simply to be called by name and loved. Christ is risen for me, and for you. Christ is risen indeed.