

## BELIEVING WITHOUT SEEING

John 20: 19-31

Covid has changed a lot of things. It has introduced a whole new level of vulnerability into our world, a vulnerability that touches us all. We are vulnerable in our collective health like never before. The risks we take in gathering socially are risks we take with eyes wide open now in a way we have not known before in our lifetimes.

We are vulnerable to social division in a way we have not known before. During Covid we witnessed protests ranging from Black Lives Matter, Indigenous Lives Matter and protests over human rights and women's rights, all the way to protests over vaccine mandates and enforced vaccination rules. Where we stand on all those issues and more have pushed us into taking sides, and sometimes taking sides has caused many of us to come into serious conflict with people close to us too, be they family, friends or neighbours.

And this and so much else also points to a vulnerability when it comes to faith and doubt like never before. Who do we believe? Who do we doubt? What information is trustworthy? Our traditional sources of expertise and authority in science have been questioned like never before. Theories some of us believe are conspiracy theories and therefore doubtful, are theories others believe and are willing to risk their very lives believing. Others of us have put our faith in science, vaccines and vaccine mandates, even as the results are not always as definitive as we would like. Others of us question the whole vaccination industry and to what extent it is profit driven and politically driven as much as it is health driven.

Doubt is important. Without doubt we would never get at the truth of things and the justice of things. Blind faith only serves those who want to hold the power and control to benefit themselves as much as they may want to convince themselves and the world into believing they are benefitting society. Without doubt nothing would improve or get better, those responsible for injustice would not be held accountable, and those with privilege would not be challenged to use their privilege to serve rather than do what they like without accountability.

But here's the thing. Doubt can also destroy society and destroy us. Without trust, without faith and a faith that is shared, we cannot work together, rely on each other and support one another. People need to earn our trust, yes. But they should be able to earn it. We should be able to ask questions and search for answers and for truth, yes. But at the end of the day, we need to land somewhere with some trust that there is truth, there is justice and there is a larger goodness that can bring us together as people for the welfare of all. Trust doesn't mean we have to agree about everything. But it does mean we have to believe that we're in this

together and care for the welfare of each other even if we share different perspectives for how that may best be done.

So then, with this as an introduction, let me make two statements I think all of us can agree with.

1) We are always vulnerable to doubt because we as humans do not know everything. There is as much mystery as there are answers. There are great unknowns as much as there is truth to be discovered.

2) We are always vulnerable to doubt because we cannot control everything and make it as we want. Even with all our planning, preparation, resources and support, the outcome is rarely certain when it comes to the big challenges of life – health, finances, relationships and the society around us. And so, we doubt what the outcome will be for all our faith, and we doubt the answers we're given for all the faith we have in the research, knowledge and wisdom.

But does this mean doubt is the enemy of faith? No. Doubt challenges faith to grow stronger, to be better informed, with better resources and with greater humility knowing that truth is reached better through a community of dialogue, research and wisdom rather than through individual discernment alone.

But then, we need to take that leap into faith. Faith takes courage to be faith. Faith means we trust even when there is questioning and mystery too. Faith means we hope even when there is fear and uncertainty. Faith means we reach out in love even when what we may get back may not be love.

OK, preacher, some fine statements you make. But how do we get faith, how do we grow faith and how do we find the courage to believe even if we cannot know for sure?

Let's dive into our scripture reading in search of revelatory guidance. If anyone needed faith in the face of their doubt it is the disciples of Jesus on Easter Sunday before they encounter him alive. Can you imagine what was going through their minds and hearts? Everything Jesus had said and promised had gone out the window as fear and doubt had swallowed them whole. All they recall is the trauma of what they witnessed as Jesus was arrested, beaten, tortured, mutilated and hanged publicly where he was kept alive for six hours, exposed and ridiculed by those happy to see him dead and gone. What a way to kill faith in a person and a movement!

And yet, In the midst of their fear and doubt, something happens to resurrect new faith. They see Jesus and they see him in a way where they are convinced he is alive and among them and in a total spirit/body way too. We simply take in this story without trying to explain it. What

we can explain based on what we're told, is what the encounter with Jesus does for his followers in the house that day.

They hear these words: "Peace be with you." "Breathe in my peace, dear friends, and rediscover the calm of trust in me. I am here and with you. Whatever horrors you witnessed and whatever the authorities believed they had accomplished in engineering my death in a publicly crushing way, I am alive again, I am risen, and as God has raised me I will rise up in you if you open your hearts in faith to receive me. Check out the scars on my hands and in my side, still very tender. It really is me and I am more alive than ever. Receive my peace so that your fears can begin to fall away and your hearts open to new life greater than anything you have known before'... Wow!

But more than words of peace, Jesus also breathes on them. They feel Jesus' breath and with his breath, the wind of the Holy Spirit flowing into them. In John's gospel account, Pentecost comes early, on this first day of Easter. With the peace of Christ they also receive his Spirit so that faith can rise up in them despite their fears and doubts. We often need what we ourselves don't have and cannot imagine possible. We are so overwhelmed with doubt at times, and especially in difficult times, that no less than God's Spirit is needed to raise up in us what we cannot raise up in ourselves. So it is with faith. Real faith is always a gift and always the work of the Holy Spirit, just like genuine peace is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Even as the world continues to be a chaotic place where evil often overcomes good, the peace within grounds us so that we do not give up on goodness but are energized by it. We will protest and advocate for justice because fresh faith has empowered us to trust that goodness will overcome someday in some way.

The disciples also receive a mission and a purpose: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The disciples become "apostles": those who are sent. The faith rising up in them will be the hope and love they also carry into a world where fear and doubt have swallowed up many or left them jaded and cynical about any goodness winning. New faith will carry hope and love into a broken world in need of healing.

Finally, the disciples receive a mandate to justice: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The world, the powers, the systems and the people who defend them must be held accountable according to the standards of justice rooted in love. 'You, dear disciples, are now to be my hands, feet and heart in the world, and my voice too. Goodness cannot remain silent. It must speak out loud and proud and sometimes angry. But never let your anger turn into vengeance or hate. Retaining the sins of the perpetrators must never be an end in itself. Healing, reconciliation and the power of forgiveness must always be available for all, even the worst of us... for nothing of God's creation is evil in itself. It has become corrupted and you must hold on to faith that healing is always possible no matter how much you may doubt it.'

But this brings us all the way to Thomas. Why is Thomas in this story? Because Thomas is like many of us. He is not there when the other disciples encounter Jesus. They tell him, but he cannot believe it. Would you? I would like to believe it. Who wouldn't? But having been burned in his faith and hope as it has been dashed repeatedly and in very traumatic ways, Thomas cannot believe. It will take nothing less than a physical encounter with Jesus for him to believe. Jesus comes to him. He invites Thomas to touch his wounds. Seeing Jesus take up physical space before him, hearing him speak and touching him... It's all so overwhelming for Thomas. "My Lord and my God!" he exclaims.

And what is Jesus' response? "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." In other words: 'just seeing me alive and believing I am alive is fine and good Thomas. But what difference will it ultimately make for you? Will you believe in my love when I call you to share it and sow seeds of it in a world where many will stand against you, be ungrateful, spiteful, indifferent, or where the results will not be visible right away or for a long time?' You see, believing in the power of love to heal, to bless and to resurrect new life is a long journey without immediate gratification or results. We need to learn how to believe without seeing right away and sometimes without seeing at all. We must love and we must fight for justice regardless of what results or outcomes we may or may not witness. Why? Because love and the justice that is love expressed in situations where there is injustice, is good and right and true in and of itself regardless of whether the powers that be bend to its demands or influence.

It is important to be encouraged and empowered by evidence that Jesus is alive and that his love in us as his hands, feet and heart do make a difference in the world around us. But often, we will not see the evidence in any clear way. We need the kind of faith and hope in the love and life of Jesus that is alive even when we cannot see where it may lead. As Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels: "When the Son of humanity returns in glory, will he find faith on earth?" Will there be any of us left who have not given up or given in, but have the Spirit blown into us and renewed year after year through Easter? Will faith rise up again and again in us regardless of the evidence of sight? Or will doubt have eroded our faith and hope in love, reducing love to mere sentiment or like a cozy blanket keeping us warm in a cold and bitter world? Is that all love will be for us, or will it rise up again and again strong, fierce, tenacious, and deeply compassionate?

Jesus was calling his disciples then, as he is calling us now: "Breathe in my peace. Receive my Spirit. I send you out into the world as my hands, feet and heart. Hold the world and each other accountable, but always be ready to forgive. Believe I am with you and in you breathing my Spirit into the world through you... And believe in me especially in those challenging and discouraging times when you do not see me, when doubt rises up strong and fear overwhelms. Ride the doubt, listen to it, learn from it, but then, move beyond it to ever new faith and hope

in what love can yet do... Do you hear Jesus' call? Do you believe and hope in the power of love despite your doubt?

Prayer: Come to us O risen Christ... Breathe your peace into us... Breathe your Holy Spirit into us... Empower us with new faith and hope in the power of your love to move through us as your hands, feet and heart in the world... Give us the courage to hold the world and ourselves accountable to your justice, but always with ready forgiveness in our hearts... And meet us again and again when fear and doubt overwhelm us... In your name we pray: Amen.