

THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

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St John 20:19 – 31

Introduction

Our focus for the second Sunday in Easter is the appearance of the risen Lord to the disciples in the upper room and how he greeted the fearful disciples with the comforting words; peace be with you. During that encounter he breathed on them the gift of the Holy Spirit empowering them and sending them into the world even as his father sent him. It meant that whatever mission on was now the mission of the disciples. They were even empowered to offer forgiveness Jesus came to carry out the same commission as his. We can well imagine that this was a welcomed visit for the grieving disciples, but one of them, namely Thomas was absent and when he was told of all that happened he would not believe unless he saw for himself. One week later Jesus reappeared for the sake of Thomas who is known to many even to this day as doubting Thomas. But maybe Thomas's doubt was not such a bad thing after all which means that when we experience doubt it does not mean that we love God any less or are any less loved by God.

Let us pray:

The season of Easter is above all a season of life: resurrection life, eternal life, or, as the end of this passage puts it, just plain "life" -- "that through believing you may have life in his name" (verse 31).

Of course, the "life" spoken of here is not actually "just plain" life, but is a distinctive kind of life, a distinction that is often lost in translation from the original language of the text - Greek.

Throughout the New Testament, the English word "life" comes from three different Greek words: *psyche*, *bios*, and *zoe*. When John (and the other New Testament writers) speak, on the one hand, of life in general they are referring to *psyche* or *bios*. They are talking about the kind of life possessed by creatures simply by virtue of being alive. Before coming to Jesus chapter 3 of John's gospel Nicodemus was very much alive, but only in the sense of these two words; *psyche* and *bios*, mind and body, hence Jesus' invitation to him to be born again.

On the other hand, the word "life" as used at the end of this passage, is derived from the Greek word *zoe*. *Zoe* is eternal life, taken literally – life of the ages. It is the life given to those who believe; life given to those who are born of God. It is the kind of life that Jesus offered Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the woman at the well in Chapter 4. It is the kind of life that transforms us from merely existing to living in the abundance and eternity of God. The kind of life that enables us to live in hope even in a world of death and despair.

This life was present at creation and is referenced by John in his account of the creation in chapter 1 ("in him was life (*zoe*), and the life (*zoe*) was the light of all people" (1:4)).

This life connects the deepest purposes of God with the ultimate purpose of John's gospel: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah ... and that believing you may have life (*zoe*) in his name." This *zoe* does not replace the other kinds of lives; we are still the same creatures we were before we come to Jesus. It does, however, bring us into the fullness of grace; so that we are, also, *not* still, the same creatures we were before—we are physically and biologically the same but on a spiritual plain, different.

In John 20 we find the disciples demonstrating more *psyche* than *zoe*, hunkered down behind locked doors in much the same way as we are today but for fear of a different kind. They were fearful of the Jewish authorities that crucified Jesus their Lord.

It might have been that they were locked in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held. But they met in something very like terror. They knew the bitterness of the Jewish authorities and all the atrocities that accompanied the arrest, trial and death of Jesus, and they were afraid that their turn would come next. So they were meeting in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the stair and for every knock at the door, lest the emissaries of the Sanhedrin should come to arrest them too.

Then out of nowhere, or through no opened door the risen Christ appears in the room, in the midst of their fears with the first of a three-fold "Peace be with you."

Those fearful and despairing disciples needed to hear those words in much the same way that world today needs to hear those words of Jesus – peace be with you. In a time of discontent, of uncertainty and of loneliness brought on by the pandemic we need to hear the assuring words of Jesus to dispel our fears. It is the kind of peace we experience when our worst fears are not realized; the relief that against all odds, death has not won; the profound realization that out of the blood, the nails, the thorns, the beating, and the cross has come this life, this *zoe* of God, right into their midst.

And when for further confirmation he showed them his hands and side, they rejoiced with great joy when they saw the Lord. Jesus will go on to speak these comforting words to them yet again and breath on them saying receive the Holy Spirit but Thomas not present and John is keen to point out that fact.

Maybe Thomas needed some fresh air, or to see the outdoors as many are longing to, today. We do not know for sure where he was or what he was about but we do know that when he

returned and was told of the visit of the risen Lord, he would not believe. Thomas declared that he will in no wise believe unless he not only saw for himself, but also touch the wounds of Jesus. And so Jesus paid Thomas the complement and appeared as he did at first this time with Thomas present. At any rate, Jesus does not admonish Thomas and, in fact, invites him to satisfy his doubt by seeing for himself (verses 27). Even if he were to be considered a doubter, as he is traditionally viewed, he is welcomed into the peace of the risen Christ before he can either apologize or defend himself. Step by step Jesus led Thomas until believing in his heart and confessing with his lips he declared the now immortal words; **My Lord and my God.**

In so doing Jesus taught that everyone needs to be journeyed with on this journey of faith – that everyone is not at the same place. Implicit in the actions of Jesus is the idea that it is wrong to dismiss someone because he or she expresses doubt. Who among us never doubted? Doubt is as much a part of life as faith is. Doubt is the other side of the coin we call faith or as another John, John McDermott in his suggests: **in our doubt there is believing, in our life, eternity.**

For Thomas the cross and the events of Good Friday were only as he expected. Earlier in John's gospel (11;16) when Jesus proposed going to Bethany after news came of Lazarus' illness, Thomas' reaction was; "Let us also go, that we may die with him". There can never be any doubt that he loved Jesus. He loved him enough to be willing to go with him and die with him when all the others were hesitant and probably afraid. Thomas believed in Jesus and yet he is labelled a doubter for the one time he expressed his doubt. We might have called him believing Thomas for all the times he believed, or loyal Thomas for his stout loyalty to Jesus. What he had expected had happened and it broke his heart so much that he could not look into the eyes of his friends and therefore went to be alone.

If Thomas made any mistake it was not doubting. If there were any mistake on the part of Thomas it would have been the isolation he sought. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. It is a good thing, the Psalmist reminds us, a blessed and a lovely thing even, for God's people to live together in unity – especially in times of difficulty such as when the saviour died. And it does us well too, even with all the restrictions of the pandemic never to seek isolation but insofar as it is possible to fellowship with each other, to build up, encourage and draw strength from each other. Because Thomas was not there with the other disciples he missed the first appearance of the risen lord. We miss a great deal too when we separate ourselves and seek to be alone. There is much benefit to be had from fellowshiping with other people.

Thomas' honest doubt demonstrated two great virtues about him. He refused to say that he understood and believe what he truly did not understand and believed. There is an unrelenting honesty about Thomas that he is often not recognized for. Instead he is popularly known as doubting Thomas. He would not cover up or deny his doubts and pretend that they do not exist. He was not the kind of person who would simply recite a creed without understanding what it is about – he had to be sure, and he was right. Lord Alfred Tennyson wrote that there lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creed. There is more faith in the person who insists on being sure than in those who glibly repeat things that they never thought out or counted the cost. The kind of doubt that seeks certainty is that which in the end arrives at certainty. It took Thomas from the place of I will not believe unless... to the place of confessing **My Lord and my God**.

The beauty of how the gospel is narrated shows that Thomas is not the only one that doubted. Even the women to whom Jesus appeared first, doubted. And did not the other disciples doubt the good news of the resurrection and went to the tomb to see for themselves? We would have fared no differently today even with all our technological advancement. Jesus provided them living proof of his resurrection because unless they themselves were convinced of this glorious fact, they would be no way they could convince anyone else and the message of the resurrection would be in jeopardy.

The other thing demonstrated by Thomas' doubt is that when he was certain he went the full way. There were no ifs or buts about Thomas and this is expressed in his confession: My Lord and God: He was not doubting for the sake of doubt. He was doubting in order to become sure. He doubted in order to believe. When a person wrestles through doubt to the conviction that Jesus is Lord, and that God raised him from the dead, that person attains a kind of faith that the person who unthinkingly accepts cannot reach.

There is something admirable about Thomas. Faith is never an easy thing for him. He must first be sure. Thomas' response stands as the highest affirmation of Christ by any person in the gospel, "My Lord and my God!" (verse 28). What the narrator proclaimed in the prologue in chapter one of the gospel ("and the Word was with God and the Word was God", this non-doubting Thomas speaks from his own heart and lips. His words exceed even the stated purpose of the gospel, which the narrator provides immediately following, that these things are written to lead us to believe "merely" that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

The world and communities of faith often do not do well with people like Thomas. They are sometimes labelled as dissidents, doubters and direct challengers. Sometimes we can be very hard on ourselves and on each other because we dare to express doubt or a varying

opinion. We compare ourselves with other people's expression of faith and think ourselves or other people less than we really are.

Jesus' treatment of Thomas provides a good model for pastors, church leaders and every disciple not to be too eager to rebuke those who find it difficult to believe or those who move at a slower pace than ourselves. We should never lose sight of our goal, namely, bringing those we serve, including the wider community to confess Jesus as their Lord and God. Like Jesus gave Thomas the opportunity to put his fingers into his side and feel where the piercing had been done to help him move from the place of doubt to the belief, are we prepared to patiently take others through the lessons of faith – addressing their doubts one by one? After all, is not that the point of the gospel and the reason Jesus came and died and rose again – that all may believe?

That is the point on which John ends the chapter, and linking it with how he opens his account. The chapter ends with a reminder that it contains only a small part of all Jesus did, only some of the signs and wonders witnessed by John and were written that people may believe that Jesus is the son of God. The readers are not commanded to believe but are invited to examine the evidence of Jesus' words and deeds and to conclude that Jesus is who he says he is, namely the Christ, the Son of God. Those who arrive at this place will receive the blessing of zoe – eternal life, resurrection life. We do not arrive at the same time because we move at different pace and Thomas' experience is a case in point.

The inclusion of Thomas and his honest doubt in the scripture are timely reminders that even among the most faithful, even among those with the best of intension there are those who do not fully understand. That is why this thing called faith is a journey. It is a journey on which we seek to understand that which we believe or want to believe. As we press onward on this journey, may the prayer of St Anselm a famous eleventh century Christian thinker and bishop of Canterbury be ours today; Lord, I believe, help thou our unbelief. Amen.