A Week Later

John 20:19-31

Buckingham Church

April 11, 2021

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Thomas wasn’t there when the risen Christ showed up to bless the disciples with peace, to show them the wounds on his body so they would know for sure it was really him and understand that God knows woundedness in and out, and to breathe the Holy Spirit into them. Thomas wasn’t there to receive that blessing and witness this miracle. I have no idea where he was, and it doesn’t matter. What matters is he was not in the room where it happened!

But then he came back to the room, after the risen Christ was gone. When his friends told Thomas what had happened, he must have looked at them with his mouth open and his eyes skeptical. “Uh, no, I don’t think so. Whatever you saw, it wasn’t Jesus. We know what happened to him. I don’t believe you.”

At this point, the disciples had several options. They might have said to Thomas that if he didn’t believe, he couldn’t stay. There are plenty of churches that have taken that attitude over the years, the “my way or the highway” church polity. Or they might have sat him down and bombarded him with all sorts of reasons why they were right, and he was wrong, hoping to wear him down with convincing. They might have pitied him and said that somehow, he must not be worthy because Jesus hadn’t showed up when he was there so Jesus clearly didn’t love him as much.

How do I know the disciples did none of those things? We are told that Thomas was still with them **a week later**! The only way that could have been true is if, as the late Rachel Held Evans puts it, those disciples not only believed intellectually that Christ was alive, but they acted as if it were true.

You don’t believe something if you just say you believe it. You believe it when your body and brain and heart move in the world to embody that belief. I think that’s what Thomas experienced among the disciples in that week after Easter when he had no experience of the risen Christ! He felt enveloped with love. The others believed, but rather than force their beliefs on him or make him feel less than, they simply loved him, showing him in their words and actions how they had been changed by this encounter with Jesus. So that, when the risen Christ did appear to Thomas, his heart had been prepared by his friends. He didn’t need to touch Jesus’ wounds; he had already experienced a community formed by the wounded healer, the “good is more powerful than evil” truth of Christ rising, the “love wins” fullness of resurrection. The appearance of the risen Christ was merely the confirmation, for his friends had, effectively, believed him into belief already.

I think that this lays out the truth that for us the question is not “do I believe Jesus rose from the dead,” but “am I acting like I do?” The discussion is not whether Jesus’ resurrection was a bodily resurrection or a spiritual one, but whether that resurrection created a transformed community then, and continues to do so now. The very first church, I believe, did not come together on Pentecost; it came together in that upper room where the disciples had been hiding, and where they loved Thomas into faith.

I do not know what you all believe, or doubt or downright disbelieve about God or the world, but I do know that if you are like most UCC churches, there is a great continuum out there of belief and doubt. I’ve been in churches where I’ve asked people to read in worship or teach children or mentor youth, and sometimes have had the response, “Well, I don’t think my faith is strong enough to do that. I’m not sure I believe all this or ever will.” My response is “that’s okay. I’m not always sure I believe all this, either, but I do know that I believe in this community and that I have been changed by knowing Christ through them, and that our call is to hold one another in doubt or faith.” I do know how important it is to let each other and especially our children know that asking questions and being skeptical, like Thomas did and was, is okay. That God does not reject us for doing that, but rather honors our questions and invites us to reach out at the point of our doubt and touch holiness.

You may have read about recent Gallup polls that indicate that less than half of Americans are members of a faith community of any religion. That doesn’t mean they don’t believe in God or have questions or are seeking connection: many of them are. **It means they are convinced that organized religion is not the place to find it.** Which makes me so sad. As if Thomas experienced rejection or hurt from those disciples and decided to find somewhere else in the city to live. So many have experienced so much hurt and rejection from the church because of race, sexuality, gender identity, disability, or a veritable myriad of other reasons the church excels at finding to exclude. Including the unwillingness to ascribe to a very specific list of beliefs.

The disciples became church when they loved Thomas despite his unwillingness to believe exactly as they believed. They lived out that Spirit infusion in their love of him. It was a small group and a seemingly small gesture, but it had huge implications. One of the largest Christian groups in India is called the Mar Thoma church, and they date their founding to Thomas, who is said to have gone as a missionary to India. Today there are 1.1 million members of the Mar Thoma church worldwide. All because Peter, James, John, Matthew, Andrew, and the others loved Thomas into faith for 7 days.

We need to think about this at Buckingham Church. Who is out there, doubting, maybe hurting, wounded themselves, who seek a wounded healer like Jesus but don’t know where to find that kind of love? How do we let them know we can love them? Well, we practice that kind of loving. We act as if our Lord is risen, even if we aren’t always sure what that means, and, to seem trite perhaps, they’ll know we are Christian by our love. It’s not about gaining new members. It’s about loving someone who then might love others, and who knows where it goes from there? Amen.