

D Narrative 31  
April 8, 2018  
Poulsbo  
Pastor Alison Shane

John 20:19-31

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Sometimes when we get to this story of Doubting Thomas, I feel like I've encountered an old friend. Maybe it's because we met Thomas every year with the Revised Common Lectionary on the Sunday after Easter. Maybe it's because for some reason, Thomas is so famous that our culture has created an idiom out of "Doubting Thomas." Or maybe it's because there's something about Thomas that resonates with me.

Whatever the cause, every time we hear his story, I feel for Thomas, because I don't think it's fair that generations of Christians have called him "Doubting Thomas."

Mary doesn't believe that Jesus has been raised, Jesus has an encounter with Mary, Mary believes and tells the disciples. The disciples don't believe that Jesus has been raised, Jesus has an encounter with the disciples, the disciples believe and tell Thomas. Thomas doesn't believe that Jesus has been raised, Jesus has an encounter with Thomas, and Thomas believes. And yet goes down in history as "Doubting Thomas." His experience was no different from anyone else's, but he's the one who remains "Doubting Thomas."

And not only was his experience no different from anyone else's, it is also exactly the kind of experience we have come to expect as we read John's gospel. In John's gospel, people don't just believe. They believe because they've encountered Jesus, and Jesus has brought them into a relationship, which for John is the same thing as believing. In John we see that encounters with Jesus change everything...remember Nathanael, the woman at the well, Nicodemus, and all the people who came after? John has showed us that those encounters are everything, and they often come through others: "Come and see."

So why do we expect Thomas to have a different experience? Why do we expect him to believe without being beckoned to come and see? Why do we expect him to have a relationship with the risen Jesus without the encounter with the risen Jesus?

It might be because of Jesus' response: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But this isn't censure of Thomas. It can't be, because Thomas is no different from anyone else in the room. If it were censure, Jesus would be censuring the entire community. They've all seen. But really, Jesus is merely comforting those whose encounter with Jesus cannot be in the flesh. It's assurance for John's readers. For you.

Blessed are you. You have not seen and yet have come to believe. Well, you have not seen Jesus in the flesh. But that doesn't mean you haven't seen Jesus. It doesn't mean you haven't encountered Jesus. You have. And it has been through others.

You have encountered Jesus when someone said to you, "Come and see." Maybe it was Grandma. Maybe it was Mom or Dad. Maybe it was a friend. Maybe it was someone you met in a coffee shop. Or maybe you walked into worship off the street one day and a stranger you met there invited you to come and see. Or you might have heard the call from Rob Bell or Tony Campolo. But somehow, through someone, you encountered Jesus.

And we come to worship to encounter Jesus again and again, through the spoken Word, through music, through this meal, through community with these people. We come and we encounter Jesus on Good Friday in the story, in the drama, in the music. We come and we encounter the risen Christ on Easter with fanfares and shrouds dropped and bright flowers reminding us of new life.

Like those John describes, we *have* encountered Jesus, Jesus has brought us into relationship, therefore we believe. God has brought you into relationship with God. In the waters of baptism, God has claimed you and brought you into the relationship of a parent and child. You are a child of God. God has brought you into relationship, therefore you believe.

And God sends you out into the world to invite others to “come and see.” And beyond inviting, you also ARE the way the world has an encounter with Jesus. When you meet someone new, they are encountering Jesus in you because you are a child of God. The people who know you base their understanding of God on you, because you are a child of God. You are their encounter with Jesus.

And as such, it’s OK not to be super confident in your understanding of all that God has done through Jesus on the cross. It’s OK not to fully understand why the cross was necessary. It’s OK to have questions about how a God of love could allow suffering in the world, how a God of mercy could stand by and watch his son be crucified. It’s OK to have questions. And not just OK, it’s crucial that you have questions. Because often those questions are the common ground in a conversation with someone who is encountering Jesus in you.

And I think one of the best things you can say to someone who has lots of questions, concerns, even doubts... is, “You know, I wrestle with that, too. Let’s explore that together.” And then you can talk to others together. You can come to worship together. You can read together.

One of the interesting things about parenting in a technological age is helping our kids navigate the world of digital information, trying to discern what is real, what is scientific, what is helpful, and what is just random garbage that someone out there wants you to believe because they had a thought and therefore it must be true. Which websites can you trust?

The same can be said of walking with a person through faith questions. You need to be able to be clear about why you trust the sources of faith you do. You need to be able to be clear about why you interpret scripture the way you do. You need to be able to be clear why you disagree with the people you do. But first, you need to be able to talk about your own encounter with the risen Jesus, describe how that encounter changed you, and identify how you see God’s presence in the world. We encounter Jesus daily; we just need to learn to identify those encounters and we need to learn how to speak about them.

Because that’s how the kingdom of God grows. You have encountered Jesus, you continue to encounter Jesus, and you are the encounter others have with Jesus. And the more we gather for worship, for education, for fellowship, the more we ask questions and seek out not so much answers but revelation, the better we will be at revealing Jesus to the world, just as someone revealed Jesus to us. And then together we can, like Thomas, declare our faith in the risen Christ, “My Lord and my God!” Amen