



Sunday after Easter: April 28, 2019
Rev. Kirstie Engel
“Doubt as a Sign of Faith”: John 20: 24-29

When reading today’s gospel of John at first glance, it immediately took me back to my first year at Phillips Theological seminary in Tulsa where I was pursuing my Masters of Divinity degree, when I had a conversation with one of my colleagues and we were talking about Jesus...because that is what good theological students do right?! We talk about Jesus!

And we had a good discussion about justice and love and other teachings of Jesus Christ. Then we started to talk about Easter and resurrection and what the resurrection meant to us and my colleague then stated to me, “I do not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.” And I tell you, the high Christology thinker I was trained to be, suffered whiplash on that day, as I whipped my head back to do a double take and say to him, “What do you mean that you don’t believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead?”

I tell you I was shocked, I was confused...I wondered what type of seminary had I got myself enrolled into.....folks, that statement led me into a crisis of faith! I just couldn’t wrap my head around such a conviction.

Was my colleague talking about the same Jesus, who was so mighty, that the scriptures say that in the aftermath of Lazarus death, 4 days to be exact, where the stench was so malodorous, that Jesus called Lazarus out by name from the mouth of the tomb and Lazarus came back to life? Not to mention preachers in my tradition would often preach that Jesus had to call Lazarus specifically out by name, for if he would have just yelled into the tomb, “Come Out,” that all of the dead would have been raised.

Was my colleague talking about the same Jesus who transfigured himself on the top of Mount Horem with Peter, James and John? Was my colleague talking about the same Jesus that Mary Magdalene along with the other women saw after she witnessed the empty tomb? Yes that was the Jesus he was referring to. And so to be honest, pursuing my Master’s degree at Phillips was a very painful and confusing experience for me, because later I learned that others felt the same way as my colleague. Folks, my experience was so painful/confusing that I chose to attend Phillips all over again to pursue my Doctorate...ha ha.

But back then, I believed that I was in a seminary filled with people who just didn’t get it. I believed that I was surrounded by people who did not believe in Jesus. So how did I handle this experience as a preacher? I learned to become two different kinds of a preachers during that period of my life. If I had to preach at my seminary, I focused on what I considered to be safe topics like love and food and fellowship...because everyone likes to eat right?! If I had to preach at the predominantly black church in Wichita KS, Saint Mark, I preached the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And I tell you folks that back then, I thought that I had this double life preacher thing down to an art.... so I thought. Because later in my vocation I have learned, that our spiritual formation is a journey that is fluid. Our spiritual journey is one that will stretch you and I and take us out of our comfort zones, whether we want it to or not; especially if a person is called to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For it is inevitable that there will a precocious little ten year old child, who will look you in the eye and ask you after their grandpa has died, “what is going to happen to my grandpa now”, as Jane reflected in her own story on Easter. So again leading the double preacher life was not going to cut it.....this I instinctively knew.

And so it wasn't until I moved to Lincoln NE, that I began to face this safe double preacher persona that I had developed within myself, (because let's face it...it is difficult to confront an embedded theology that you assumed to be the way, the truth and the life).....and really ask myself...what is it that I believe about this Jesus Christ?

Is the good news that the tomb was empty? Is the good news that Jesus was able to show Thomas his wounds in his hands and side? Is the good news eternal life with Jesus? Is the good news that prior to that conversation back in John 20: 19-23, that Jesus revealed his wounds to the other disciples as well? Is the good news that Mary and the women at the tomb had the same story of seeing Jesus? Is the good news that Jesus physically rose from the dead?

I had to ask myself these questions and more, especially now since I will soon be preaching week to week at First as their new pastor... “What is it that is important to share about Jesus? What is the good news?” And folks I know that none of us will never fully know all of the answers here.....today....or even in this lifetime.

But I think it is important for us to be like Thomas in our spiritual journeys...and not shy away from these tough questions because of fear of what we might discover. I think it's important to ask these tough questions because I sense that one of the reasons why we are declining as a church, is not just because of some of our exclusive ways in how we keep people out with all of our isms and discriminations. (That is a whole other sermon by itself...Amen.)

But I suspect that another reason why churches are declining, is because we are not always authentic in the ways that we engage scripture and live out scripture. We tend to shy away from scriptures and stories that are problematic or complex or problematically complex.....and folks.....this type of evasive theology is just not going to cut it anymore!

What I am saying is that there are more than just precocious ten year olds out there, who are asking tough questions; who are even discerning that some of what we are teaching and preaching just doesn't pass the smell test of rationality and credibility. This is why Thomas is one of the best passages of scriptures to talk about in my opinion.

Because in my eyes, Thomas represents the seats that have yet to be filled. Those that are spiritual but not religious. Those that are church-ed out. Those who have been hurt by the church. Folks that are wanting to be able to ask questions as to who Jesus was and what he was all about without being demonized for doing so. Folks who want to know what Jesus death and crucifixion and resurrection is all about. Folks who want to know why it should matter if we follow Jesus ways or not. Folks who want to see evidence in our hands and hearts, whether we truly represent the love and justice and mercy that we preach and teach about.

So church, we cannot skirt around these issues because it is scary. We cannot skirt around these issues because it makes us uncomfortable...or even doubt the very embedded theology we may have grown up with.

There are a world of inquisitive Thomas's out there looking at us, wanting to interact and engage with real, relatable, broken people, who can explain to them why any of this matters, Jesus, church, Easter...any of it! Is it alright if I preach this morning?

So that is what this sermon is about...who is Jesus and why he matters? And I believe that this passage of scripture addresses this question; why Jesus mission and ministry matters.....and allow me to share my train of thought with you. And so I think it is important to share with you first and foremost, that for me to attempt to answer this question, why Jesus and his mission and ministry matters; I needed to soften some of my own personal convictions that informs my high Christologyso that I can perhaps see the bigger picture of what God is trying to reveal to me.

And so when I did this, when I softened some of my own high Christology convictions, what I began to recognize within myself is that a theology that is so rigid and absolute, surely does not reflect the love of Jesus either....because let's face it, we can get stuck in our embedded theology. A theology that would not allow questions and concerns is not even consistent with who Jesus is or his character.

Because how I know this, is because it is in our gospel today. You see, through Thomas we see that Jesus welcomes questions. Through Thomas we see that Jesus is accepting and even tolerant when we have doubts and uncertainty and even disbelief in our spiritual journeys. Because one thing I know for sure; all of us have had doubts at one point and time in our lives. It is normal. It is even expectant.

Furthermore, I have preached this before, but I think it imperative to mention it every time we approach the gospel of Jesus; that you and I, our faith foundation has been informed in many, many different ways; ways that we might not have even considered. Furthermore, the reason for me taking the time to reveal this about my own faith story is because I believe that our Christology, (which is essentially how you and I view and understand Jesus), is shaped by our culture, human experience, traditions and personally I think in many ways, our socio economic position in society informs our theology as well.

Our Christology, like I have also shared time and time again from Adam Hamilton's book, "John: The Gospel of Light and Life" book; reveals that how we view Jesus, will often fall into two schools of thought concerning Jesus; a low Christology that focuses more on the humanity of Jesus and his ministry on Earth—and a high Christology that focuses more on the divinity aspect of Christ.

And the goal that Pastor Adam (senior pastor of Church of the Resurrection in KC) said we should all strive to be theologically—is somewhere in the middle; not emphasizing that Jesus humanity and divinity are more important than the other; not even suggesting that one Christology is better than the other.

But somewhere in the middle, I believe is where the Spirit of God is able to talk to us. Somewhere in the middle allows the mystery to remain just that...a beautiful, complex mystery...where we do not always know the complete answers as Jane so eloquently stated in her Easter message.....and this is ok.

So it is somewhere in the middle where I believe you and I need to engage this story of Jesus and Thomas and the entire bible for that matter.... but today we are just looking at Thomas and Jesus if that is alright.

And so looking somewhere in the middle, I don't think this passage is just talking about the physical wounds on Jesus hands and side. The assumption that we can make is that Thomas is asking for proof that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. The assumption is that Thomas is seeking proof that the Jesus before him is the same one who had been with him all along. But again looking at this passage somewhere in the middle, I think it is imperative to highlight that what you and I are essentially looking at is another person's Christology unfold right before our very eyes.

We are seeing the impact of Jesus ministry through the eyes of John, who I would be remiss, if I did not highlight, has a very high Christology. Because as I teach a little bit, you see in all of the gospels, Jesus was the embodiment of love, mercy, and forgiveness. But one common theme, made most explicit in John, is that Jesus lived out the "logos" of God.

For John, Jesus was God's "word" (will) made flesh. Furthermore, John, Luke, Matthew and Mark each communicated Jesus' deity or divinity in unique, yet complimentary ways. For John Jesus is the *logos*, God who became man. For Matthew He is "God with us", worthy of worship even as an infant. For John Jesus is the Light, for Luke He is the Sunrise.

John knows Jesus uniquely as the "Lamb of God", Matthew knows Him as the one who will "save His people from their sins." For Luke Jesus is the "Savior", for Mark, He is simply "Jesus", the

one whose name means “Yahweh saves.” But for all of them....they proclaimed, “Jesus to be both Lord and God!” Are you starting to see how their Christology is playing out?

Furthermore what does it all mean? I am so glad that you asked....isn't this conversation good? Well knowing what spectrum the theology of John's Christology lies, informs the story in itself. Because for starters, the scripture that we all normally know to be the doubting Thomas scripture is not a story that shows up in the other three gospels of Luke, Matthew or Mark. The women at the tomb are in all four gospels, but the Thomas story is not.

And I am not certain if this omission is because historically, Matthew's audience was mainly the Hebrews; Mark's audience was the Romans; Luke's audience was the Greeks; and John's audience was tailored for all. But what I sense is that John may have included this Thomas story because of his high Christology.

Furthermore, knowing where John's High Christology falls, it should then be no surprise that the interaction essentially starts with, as I put it into my own words, “Jesus, prove to me that you are the awaited Son of God.....who has returned from the dead.” (vs. 25 of our text)

You see for John in my eyes, it was important for him to establish that a physical resurrection happened because that is how he saw Jesus, as the resurrected living God made flesh from God's word.

So you and I are seeing John's Christology in this story and because of John's high Christology influence, I believe this is why the interaction is framed in this manner. But what is even more interesting to me is a few things that I would have missed had my Christology not been placed somewhere in the middle. The main thing that impacted me, backing up a bit to the first portion of vs. 25 is where it says “So the other disciples told him (Thomas)... “We have seen the Lord.”

And what is fascinating about this statement (remember my Christology is in the middle now), is that the Greek translation of the statement “We have seen”, is Ἐώρακαμεν (Heōrakamen) which means to stare at, i.e. to discern clearly; or to experience. And so why this is so relevant in my eyes and furthermore might provide a deeper revelation for you as well, is that when Thomas is asking to see the wounds in Jesus hands and on his side, the main question that then comes to mind for me is “was Thomas really seeing what Jesus was trying to show him that day?” Just walk with me a little bit; vs 27 *Then he (Jesus) 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.”

Jesus provides proof for Thomas....but the question is what is Jesus asking Thomas to really see? What does Thomas seeing these wounds have to do with believing or faith? Furthermore what is the good news?

Now this is where I will not impose my Christology on you whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead or if this is purely allegorical or symbolic. ...I'll leave that for you to consider. But I will share with you my theological stance. I believe wholeheartedly in the physical, tangible, perceivable, spiritual and communal resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Through the gardener at the empty tomb, I believe that Jesus resurrection was perceivable. On the walk to Emmaus, I believe that Jesus resurrection was perceivable, spiritual and communal. In the book of John in front of the disciples including Thomas, I believe that Jesus' resurrection was physical, tangible, perceivable, spiritual and communal. I believe that our Lord is just that good.

Where Jesus can be seen in a meal, seen in a conversation, seen in a crowd and seen with our own two eyes unmistakably and very much real. So for me Jesus resurrection is not limited. For me that is the mystery of Jesus Christ revealed at its finest that involves a resurrection that is not an either/or but a both/and.

However for me, the good news does not completely reside in these statements that I have just declared. The good news for me becomes the good news completely once we have seen. You see the “aha” moment for me as I place and hopefully leave my Christology somewhere in the middle, is that the good news does not begin at the empty tomb.

The good news starts at the manger. Because at the manger is the birth of a love. At the manger is the birth of justice. At the manger is where we will find our guidance. At the manger is where we find our purpose. At the manger you and I get to witness God's message of love come into the world at a very broken time, and we get to witness that love grow and endure and even get put on trial.

And somewhere in the middle, teaches us to consider the entire story which starts at the manger and takes us to the empty tomb. And the empty tomb then is inviting us to respond. The empty tomb is waiting for us to respond to all that we have witnessed.

Are we just looking for the holes in Jesus hands or do we get what our hands are supposed to do? Are we just looking for proof of the gash in Jesus side, or do we understand the true side we are supposed to abide in; love, peace, mercy and justice for all? Jesus showed Thomas and the disciples every wound and mark they asked to see.

But the larger question becomes, did they see? The larger question for us becomes, "do we see?" Did we capture the main message in our hearts? Through the gardener at the tomb with Mary and the others, did we receive the message to remember to tend to our land and care for one another?

Through the holes in the hands and gashes on the side, did we receive the message that sometimes advocacy for inclusion and love is not easy and even accepted—but that does not mean that we are to yield and accept things as they are? The empty tomb invites us to respond, to all that we have seen and heard and witnessed.

The empty tomb invites us to respond and remember all of the teachings of Jesus Christ while here on Earth. And once we really see and discern what we are called to do, that is the resurrection that happens long before our death.

I like how the book "We make the Road by Walking, by Brian McClaren" a book we are reading as a staff named the resurrection. He called the resurrection the uprising. Marilyn Moore pointed out in our staff meeting that this was a whether peculiar description of resurrection that intrigued her in a positive way.

For me this is my "aha" moment of our text this morning. You see the author fleshes the resurrection of Jesus out by naming it to be an uprising— which is essentially a response that ought to come, after all that we have witnessed through Jesus preaching and teaching and crucifixion on Earth...an uprising.

An uprising of justice.

An uprising of peace.

An uprising of love.

That is the resurrection I am beginning to see that we should be concerned with the most. Not to say that I am not celebrating eternal life with my Lord and Savior Jesus and being reunited with my earthly father again...man I miss him...I had a great dad!

But in this interaction with Thomas, I see Jesus saying to us, "I can show you my wounds, I can show you the stripes on my back, I can even show you the wound on my side...but the bigger question is "what is your response."

And it is like Thomas when we begin to wrestle with these questions. It is like Thomas, when we are not afraid to ask these questions. Even if the questions come from a place of doubt. The good news is that I believe with my whole heart, mind, soul and life experience that it is these tough questions that are not only a sign of great faith, but will ultimately bring clarity to how you and I are to respond to the evil and injustices of this world...we are to arise against it with all we know to be true in collaboration, in prayer, out of love and compassion for others—until we are reunited with our Lord again! If you receive this message and it resonates with your spirit. Let the Church say Amen.

