

Easter 2 April 11 2021

John 20:19-31

Pastor Ann Hultquist

Do you ever read signs with moveable letters, or electronic signs as you drive by them? So often, they are advertisements and prices and boring stuff like that, but some restaurant owners and others have gotten funny or encouraging or punny with their messages, maybe especially in the last year. You might know that the community sign in Indian Hills (in the foothills near Evergreen) has a world-wide following on Facebook for it's messages. ("Dad Jokes" Like: My Fear of Moving Stairs is Escalating...)

Churches, especially those with electronic signs, have entered the stage as well--far as we know, most churches have never gotten into a 'discussion' using their signs--except for Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church and Beulah Presbyterian Church. Located across the street from each other in a town in Maryland, one week they had a kind of 'smackdown' using their signs.

It all started with the Catholics, who one day put "All Dogs Go to Heaven" on their sign.

The Presbyterians countered later with "Only People Go to Heaven, Read the Bible"

Next day the Catholic sign said "God Loves All Creation. Dogs Included"

Presbyterian sign then said "Dogs Don't Have Souls"

Catholic: "Catholic Dogs Go to Heaven. Presbyterian Dogs Talk to Your Pastor"

Presbyterian: "Being Catholic Doesn't Magically Grant Your Dog a Soul"

Catholic: "Free Dog Souls With Conversion"

Apparently they called a truce after that!...

Isn't it interesting that some followers of Jesus put such high value on knowing *for certain* just what God can and cannot do; and knowing *for certain*, without a doubt, what faith means? Over the centuries, poor Thomas "the Doubter" has had

to bear all the weight of that nickname and perhaps also all the weight of others who resonate with him but are too embarrassed to admit it.

After all, faith formation lessons and sermons are often very clear--Thomas is the dubious disciple who didn't believe Jesus was alive, so don't be like Thomas; believe and don't doubt, period.

But doesn't teaching and conversation like that muddle up what's actually in scripture leading up to this passage? First of all, what about the other 10 disciples?! They huddled together, didn't they? They were afraid. They were confused. They were ashamed. They were grieving for Jesus. And likely for themselves as well.

Jesus had said more than once that it would happen--in Jerusalem there would be suffering, the cross, and death--and in those moments, they would all desert him. "Never!!" they said, so certain that *they* would be different, *they* would be strong...and then it all came true. The sheep were scattered, just as the Shepherd had said.

When the women came with the news that the tomb was empty, that Jesus was alive again, undeniably *alive*--they had seen him--the disciples disregarded it, in fact, Luke's Gospel says: "They did not believe the women because their words seemed like nonsense." And then, they hid. Hid. You'd think, wouldn't you, that they would go looking for Jesus? That they would leave the safety of the house and search Jerusalem? But they didn't, did they? They were too scared, too confused--and they *doubted* it was true.

We hear this Gospel passage centered around Thomas every year, every Sunday after the celebration of Easter. It's unfortunate that so often many people who worship on Easter don't come back to hear this continuation of the story. They never hear this passage about *all* of the disciples and their struggle to trust and believe. I wonder if so many people then think that faith in Jesus can only come one way--easily--and if it isn't so for them, then maybe it isn't for them and that they wouldn't fit in with "true" believers."

It's also unfortunate that those of us who try to follow Jesus are often so hesitant to talk about our own doubts or difficulties in believing. In Bible study or social media or conversations we say things like "I just knew God was there," or "My faith was just everything to me. I wouldn't have made it without believing" or that real conversation-killer "God never gives you more than you can handle."

We *don't* say "My prayers went unanswered; I felt so alone; I was angry and still wonder why God would let that happen." Because we are ashamed...afraid that if we doubt, we somehow aren't faithful.

Yet those very conversations would be honest wrestling with faith in Christ--not church sign theology, for sure--but authentic talk about what it is like to trust Jesus and to try and live open-ended love and grace for ourselves and with others.

Thomas only wanted what all the rest had been given the week before. Think for a moment how this pandemic year+ has made so many of us long for human connection--to see someone, to hug someone, to just *be* with someone we care about. That's what Thomas wanted with Jesus, his teacher, his friend, the one he loved that he had seen undeniably dead.

"Peace be with you," Jesus says. No words of condemnation, no anger, no questions. Just his hands and side, scars of love--and an invitation to trust. Do you suppose that this was the last time these followers worried, were afraid, had doubts? Not likely, if you know anything about the joys and sorrows of the early church.

In the book of Revelation Jesus says "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." We might think, or maybe were taught that we better get up and get our act together and open the door or Jesus will just stand out there forever. But the good news of this Easter Gospel is that when we are unsure or doubtful or confused or joyful for that matter, Jesus comes in no matter what.

In our wrestling with faith, when we feel like we just can't believe or somehow trust God, Jesus comes, remains with us in the moment; and also often sends people, people who care about us and love us enough to stay with us as well. Let's

be honest about our struggles, share with one another our doubts and questions about faith, the world, and what it is like to try to follow this Savior who bears the scars of love.