

Mark Hanna
John 20: 19-31
RPPC

That You May Come to Believe...

I love big questions. I mean really big questions. The unanswerable kind. The kind that you can spend a lifetime pondering. Questions like, why do we drive on parkways, but park on driveways?

Seriously though, one of my favorite questions to ponder is what do we not know now that 500 hundred years from now our descendants will look back and wonder how we could have been so clueless. Think about it. It was around 500 years ago that Copernicus postulated that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around. Before that everyone took it for granted that we were literally the center of the universe and that the sun, stars and other planets reverentially revolved around us. It was a shock and revelation that this was not the case. But to us it is common knowledge.

So I ask, what will our descendants know about the world that we do not? Maybe it will have to do with dark matter and the way our universe works. Maybe it will have to do with quantum physics and the nature of reality. But more likely than not it is something that you and I cannot even conceive yet, something so far beyond our knowledge. And in 500 years, they will be teaching it in elementary school. It will be common knowledge.

At the time that John wrote the story of Jesus and his disciples, people had a very different picture of the world. They didn't know about other planets. They believed the sky was a giant dome. Basically we are surrounded by water. The water below were called the inferior waters. The waters above, kept out by the dome, the superior waters. Above them the heavens and throne of God. Beneath the earth, sheol or the underworld. The earth itself rested on pillars. Silly as that all seems to us now, that was common knowledge for the ancient people of the world around them.

But the point is not to judge the world views against one another and for us to look down on those silly ancient people. Rather it is to be reminded that our own worldview is similarly incomplete.

And it is with this reminder and humility that we best enter into the story that John shares with us about the Risen Christ, which itself is filled with big questions. The resurrection story itself raises enough question. Resurrected how? In body? In spirit?

If you are like me this story of Jesus post-resurrection appearance raises all sort of detailed questions, questions not unlike Thomas has. According to John after appearing to Mary at the tomb, the risen Christ appears to the disciples who after hearing Mary's good news, have decided that the safest place to be was a locked room. So the disciples, minus Thomas, are in a locked room, where the risen Christ appears to them in the flesh, but flesh mind you, that can walk through walls. He greets them with peace, shows them his wounds and commissions them to forgive others. This appearance releases the disciples from their fears and they run and quickly find Thomas and tell him the good news. And he promptly does precisely what they did upon hearing from Mary. He doesn't believe. The good news is too good to be true. And so he says, I will only believe if I see with my own eyes. I want proof.

Now this is where poor Thomas is wrongfully singled out as the doubter. But he only wants what the rest of the disciples have received. After all, it was just a short time ago that they were locked in the room. They weren't there because they believed Mary's account that Jesus was raised. They were there because they were scared. And so a case could be made that Thomas, not having been in the locked room, is the most faithful disciple of them all. We don't know. Maybe he was searching the streets for the Risen Christ. Or maybe he was continuing with the work and ministry that Jesus had shared with them. We don't know.

In any event Thomas wants to see for himself. He wants proof. So they had back to where they saw him last time and they wait. John tells us it was a week later that Jesus again appeared and offered Thomas the proof he desired. If only it were that easy for all of us, right? And so it is that Jesus says, "Blessed are those who do not see and yet come to believe."

That word “believe” is key. It meant something different for Thomas and the disciples than it does for us. For us, belief is about what we know to be true, to be provable, verifiable. To believe that something in the past is true we want to know whether it actually happened or not. For example, if we are to believe that this story of Jesus’ post resurrection appearance is true or not, we want to know if we could somehow travel back in time and be in that room with the disciples, would the picture that appears in our head when we read John’s words from the Bible match up to what our eyes would see and our ears would hear. To believe for us, post Copernicus, post enlightenment people is an intellectual exercise.

But for Thomas and the disciples it was a matter of the heart. As the quote from Marcus Borg that is on your bulletin cover points out:

The language of “believing” has been part of Christianity from the first century onward. But it didn’t refer primarily to believing the right theological beliefs. It meant something like the English word “beloving.” To believe in God and Jesus was to love God and Jesus. Namely, it meant to commit one’s self to a relationship of attentiveness and faithfulness.

Even the two most frequently heard Christian creeds, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, reflect this understanding. They both begin with the Latin word credo, most commonly translated into English as “I believe.” But the Latin roots of credo mean “I give my heart to.”

I offer this today because I think it is important. Perhaps this nuance of language can help propel us forward on one of the big questions of our faith. What is the resurrection and what does it mean?

And I offer it to this group in particular because you have come back, like Thomas and the other disciples, a week after Easter, after the hoopla and celebration, because, I suspect like me you love the big questions.

And like Thomas and the disciples we find the answer to our question is just a better question. We move from what is resurrection? Did it really happen? If I were there what would I see? We move from these questions of proof, to questions of vision.

We move from plain old “what?” to “so what?” What difference does it make? What does it mean to say that Jesus is alive in the world even now?

That’s really what this story is about...not how can Jesus walk through walls, or why does he still have wounds? But how can Jesus get the disciples out of their locked-rooms and into the world where he can use them.

And that is still what this story is about...how can Jesus get us out of this sanctuary where the doors are shut, out into the world where the Risen Christ is at work?

I’m just going to put this out there...you and I are good at the seeking proof game, the rational believing game. We can sit down over a cup of coffee or tea or an adult beverage and rationally discuss issues and life’s big questions. But these questions of belief are just one way that you and I keep the doors locked.

The question that gets us out of the room is what vision are you living? What or who do you give your heart to?

And so today I want to invite you to say some words with me that I am guessing you have said hundreds if not thousands of times before...with one small change. If you have never done so before, I invite you to say these words not as a matter having the right theological beliefs, but as a statement of commitment to a relationship of attentiveness and faithfulness, that meets us not just here in this room but perhaps even more so in the city streets, in our classrooms and workplaces and in our homes.

Friends, please stand with me and together let us proclaim who we believe...

***I give my heart to God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.***

***I give my heart to Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;***

he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I give my heart to the Holy Spirit,
the holy universal church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.