

Second Sunday of Easter - April 16, 2023

John 20:19–31

“New Life means growing in faith”

1. Christmas season has its 12 days of Christmas. Well, Easter has its 50 days of Easter culminating with Pentecost
  - a. (I’m sure you’re familiar with that Easter song... “On the 48<sup>th</sup> Day of Easter, my true love gave to me 48 candy-filled eggs, 47 Easter lilies...” No? well, it didn’t catch on as well as its Christmas cousin.)
  - b. But seriously, if the days after Christmas get little attention (think about it: people probably wrongly think that the 12 days of Christmas refer to the days BEFORE Christ was born!), well the days after Easter get even less attention.
  - c. And yet, this season of Easter helps us focus on the meaning of the resurrection and its impact on our faith and our life.
    - i. How did the disciples react to the news of the resurrection?
    - ii. We get stories of their reactions, but more importantly we get to see how Jesus was shaping this new chapter in their lives
  - d. During this Season after Easter or Easter Tide, our focus for the upcoming sermons will revolve around the notion of New Life.
    - i. Yes, we will talk about what it means that Jesus was raised from the dead as we do in the celebration of Easter,
    - ii. But we will rejoice in New Life embodied in Jesus, both as a witness to God’s unstoppable love, but also a promise to all of God’s children.
    - iii. In two weeks we will rejoice in new life on Youth Sunday, and on May 7, the Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, President of Sojourners, who will be our Laws Lecture speaker, will preach also on new life for our nation.
2. Which brings us to today’s passage, which on the surface, seems to be about doubt.
  - a. You may be familiar with this passage already
    - i. As reliably as you’re to hear one of the few scripture lessons telling stories of Jesus’ childhood in the Sundays after Christmas, we’re all but guaranteed that we’ll hear about Thomas the Sunday after Easter, as we do today.
    - ii. This happened in the evening of the very day Jesus had been raised
    - iii. The disciples have already heard from Mary Magdalene that she had seen Jesus alive
    - iv. Peter and the disciple Jesus loved had already been to the empty tomb.
    - v. But notice their emotion isn’t joy or even anticipation. They are afraid.
      1. They fear the authorities will come after them, either to crucify them as fellow rebels with Jesus, or to investigate them for “grave robbing”

2. Thus they have the doors locked. They're in hiding.
  3. Their emotions have been all over the place just this day, grief and shock, but the prevalent emotion is fear.
  4. I think that really signals that they didn't believe Mary Magdalene (which is specifically mentioned in other gospel accounts)
  - vi. And then Jesus, in miraculous manner appears in the middle of their locked room
  - vii. He offers them a word of peace, and shows them the wounds from the crucifixion
  - viii. THEN the disciples rejoiced. But Thomas wasn't with them.
  - ix. A week later Jesus appears again (room still locked!) and now Jesus approaches Thomas to also show him the wounds of the crucifixion. And THEN Thomas praises God
- b. It bothers me that focus on Thomas so much, I think unfairly
- i. Why don't we talk about the doubt the other disciples had?
  - ii. They all rejoiced only AFTER seeing the wounds!
  - iii. And for that matter, why do we refer to "Doubting Thomas" but not to "Denying Peter" or even "Betraying / Repenting Judas" (look it up, he repented in the gospel of Matthew)
  - iv. The weirdest thing of it is that the word doubt isn't what's in the Greek
  - v. the word Jesus uses here is actually stronger: Jesus uses the negative of the notion of faith (let's call it un-faith) or of trust (think of it as un-trusty) saying to Thomas basically: "Don't become un-trusty, but become trusty"
- <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g571/kjv/tr/0-1/>  
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4103/kjv/tr/0-1/>
- c. Sorry, it's no elegant English. It's a clumsy translation. But I think it opens up meaning which may help us understand the passage better
- i. The version we read says: do not doubt, rather believe
  - ii. But it misses the process of "becoming trusty," of becoming more faithful
  - iii. What we see in this story is growth in faith in real time. Haltingly, but growth nonetheless
  - iv. Jesus is working, even on the day of his resurrection, to help the disciples (all of them, not just Thomas) to become more faithful, to grow in their connection to God
- d. And this sets up the stage for two other huge things that happen in the passage
- i. Jesus offers them the Holy Spirit
    1. We think of Pentecost as the day when the disciples received the Holy Spirit, and they got to speak in different languages. Remember?
    2. Well this retelling of the story has a more intimate moment with Jesus sharing his very breath with them

3. This echoes the moment of creation, when God breathed life itself into the body of the newly created human.
    4. The word for breath is the same word as spirit, so here Jesus breathing on them is sharing that Spirit from God to give them new life, symbolically like the moment in the garden of Eden.
  - ii. Secondly, Jesus equips them to be instruments of forgiveness.
    1. This detail may or may not have stuck in your memory of the passage.
    2. What did he mean they get to forgive or not forgive people's sins?
    3. Here again, I think that Jesus is making his resurrection become literal new life for his disciples and those who are forming the group of believers.
    4. If he is telling Thomas to grow in faith, he is telling them all to grow in forgiveness.
    5. That is, in this new community being shaped, they are reminded that they are not only channels of the Holy Spirit, but channels also of God's forgiveness.
    6. And if channels, Jesus doesn't want the Spirit and forgiveness they receive from God to get dammed up, but rather wants it to flow freely.
3. Easter isn't just about a single day event, but it's the unleashing of new life, and in this passage, new life means our growth in faith.
  - a. Weekly I encounter people who are at the end of their rope.
    - i. It may be church members or church neighbors.
    - ii. Circumstances place them in situations where they see few good options.
    - iii. But the thing is, because I am having these conversations with people, it means that they feel the church is a place to draw near for a listening ear and support.
    - iv. Often, I have developed a relationship with them, so I can reference the progress they've made in the past, or the times when God has answered their prayers already.
      1. It's not appropriate to say what Jesus said to Thomas: do not doubt, rather believe.
      2. But it is appropriate to encourage them in this low moment in their lives to see themselves as beloved children of God, whose Spirit flows through their lungs, whose love and forgiveness is channeled in and through them.
  - b. Weekly I also encounter people who are truly embodying the kind of community Jesus was creating
    - i. These folks belong to churches or to no religious group at all.
    - ii. They cheer people on, they serve people, they share their knowledge.

- iii. They truly channel God's love through them for others to feel it.
- iv. Some of them would identify faith in God growing in them, while others would identify their faith and commitment to community as their driving force
- c. Being a person of faith is a process, and there are chances for growth.
  - i. I don't think Jesus sees Thomas as a student in a remedial class learning again something he should have learned earlier,
  - ii. Jesus sees Thomas (and the others) as all coming to the full realization of what God has done (even if they didn't fully understand it, as I was telling the kids at Easter about electricity is such a mystery for my little brain).
- 4. The season of Easter is a season of new life, happily coinciding with the earth waking up from its winter sleep. It is a season which sees us grow in our faith, grow in our sense of community, and grow in our ability to channel God's love .

#### Reflection Questions:

1. Share a story of a time which felt like the beginning of "New Life" for you (could be getting married, graduating from graduate school, getting a diagnosis of remission, etc.)
2. In the story of John 20:19–31, what is the attitude of the disciples about doubt? What is Jesus' perspective on doubt?
3. What role has doubt played in your faith life?

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-2019-31-19>

<https://hallow.com/easter/#:~:text=Only%20ordinary%20time%20is%20longer,Spirit%20descended%20on%20the%20Apostles.>