

FAITH IS A GLORIOUS THING

JOHN 20:19-31

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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The title for my sermon today is, “Faith is a Glorious Thing.”

I’m not sure how that first strikes you. For many people in our culture, faith is quite a long ways from a *glorious* thing.

Some of you know that I spent the last year of my graduate degree researching and writing about the “new atheism” (which isn’t so new anymore)—the rise of a rather aggressive and angry atheism in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Sam Harris: religious faith “is simply *unjustified* belief in matters of ultimate concern”—it is “what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor.”¹

Daniel Dennett: “unreasonable certainty that you have all the answers.”²

Richard Dawkins: “Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.”³

The rhetoric is more than a little over the top, but these are common sentiments out there in our culture. Many associate religious faith with violence, intolerance, anti-intellectualism, and arrogance (among other things).

Others wouldn’t put it quite so strongly. They would say something like, faith is an *irrelevant* thing. This would be the “whatever floats your boat” crowd. Whatever works

¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 65.

² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 51.

³ Richard Dawkins, “Is Science a Religion?” *The Humanist* 57 (1997): 26.

for you, whatever happens to get you through the day, just don't bother me with it! Or something like that.

(As an aside, it simply is not true that faith is a "religious" thing and that people who aren't religious don't have or need faith. *Everyone* exercises faith in *something*... but that's a story for another day... If you'd like to look into this a bit more, you can become the seventh person on the planet to read my masters thesis 😊.)

Even in the church, faith is not always seen as a glorious thing. We sometimes apologize for our faith, trying to make it seem eminently rational, as if a crucified Jewish peasant on a Roman cross and an empty tomb really was an entirely logical thing to believe about the nature of God and of our world and a clue about the future.

We read and praise Jesus' words about "childlike faith" but then sometimes look down on those whose faith is deemed to be simplistic or naïve or not as well-earned as our own.

So... We have a complicated relationship with faith. Faith is a *necessary* thing, maybe... or a *hopeful* thing...

... but *glorious*? We're not always so sure.

Our worship theme between now and Pentecost is "Witnessing God's Glory." We are going to be looking at these two ideas of what it means to be a "witness" and the nature of the "glory" we, as followers of Jesus are witnesses to.

I think our passage this morning gives us a window the nature of "witness" and the glory of "faith."

In my opinion, the passage we just heard takes place during one of the most exciting, surprising, confusing, frightening times in Scripture.

We are given a window into the days after the world was changed forever.

Let's set the stage from John's gospel:

- All of the events of Holy Week are in the rearview mirror
- Jesus has been arrested, crucified, buried by Joseph of Arimathea
- The stone has been rolled away from the tomb, Mary Magdalene has discovered this and she has run to get Peter and John who have also seen the empty tomb.
- None of them realize that Jesus has been raised at this point; they just assume that someone has taken his body

- Peter and John return home, while Mary remained confused and grieving.
- It is here that Jesus actually makes his first post-resurrection appearance—he talks to Mary, who initially thinks he is the gardener, he asks her why she is crying, she begs to be told where Jesus’ body has been taken
- Jesus calls her name, and she realizes who she is speaking with... she tries to cling to him out of joy; Jesus tells her instead to go and tell his brothers—the disciples—that he is ascending
- Mary tears back to the disciples and announces that she has seen the Lord!

The scene is set for triumph and vindication—Jesus is not dead, he was telling the truth, the disciples were right to put their trust in him...

But what do we see?

Well, we see the disciples huddling behind locked doors. They don’t seem to believe Mary! In fact, as we noted last week, in Luke it says that they thought Mary’s report was “an idle tale” or “nonsense” (Luke 24:11).

(As an aside... It’s interesting that Jesus would first appear to a witness that would not have been held in high esteem... Interesting that the men wouldn’t listen... I digress...)

So Jesus appears to his disciples (minus Thomas), he commissions them to do his work, breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. The disciples are overjoyed, and...

... a week later they’re back in the house, back behind locked doors.

And then... our text.

This morning’s passage describes a scene that I have, since I was a little boy, wished I could have been a part of.

I wanted to hear from Jesus with *my* ears, to see him with my eyes. When I first heard the story of “doubting Thomas,” I thought, “Yes, that’s me! I would have wanted the same thing! I would have said the same thing! “I want to *see* Jesus, then I’ll have no problem believing!!”

I wonder if all of us have wished that we were Thomas when we hear this story.

Just show me. I’ll believe it when I see it.

This is the message that jumps off the bookshelves in the popular books on religion at Chapters. “Where’s the evidence? I’m not going to believe unless I have proof.” We certainly live in skeptical times.

But probably not uniquely so. We often think or assume that those who came before us were somehow inclined to believe in all kinds of things for which they had no evidence, but the story of Thomas shows us that “I’ll believe it when I see it” is hardly a recent phenomenon.

And so Jesus grants Thomas proof. But he does much more than that, as well. He teaches Thomas and the other disciples, and through them, he teaches us.

There are a number of things that leap out at me from this text; things that I think God would have us learn from this post-Easter story this morning.

1. Doubting Thomas?
 - a. This passage is not a condemnation of Thomas as the “skeptical disciple.”
 - b. Thomas gets a bad rap because he didn’t believe (“Doubting Thomas” is not a positive term).
 - c. Thomas is like all of us:
 - i. Courage: John 11:16 (we might as well go and die with Jesus—Judeans were going to stone him if he went back to Lazarus)
 - ii. Confusion: 14:5 (we don’t know where you are going, how can we know the way?! after Jesus tells him that he is going to prepare a place for them)
 - d. **BUT** the other disciples *had also* seen, and yet they were still hiding behind locked doors. If we go back a few verses to John 20:20, we see that Jesus showed the other disciples his hands and side as well
 - e. the other disciples only believed after they had seen as well! The other gospels give the strong impression that *they* didn’t believe without evidence either because they didn’t take Mary seriously
2. It is interesting to note what Jesus says, “Peace be with you” **and** “stop doubting and believe”
 - a. Jesus is both compassionate and firm; he meets Thomas in his weakness, but he doesn’t leave him there.
 - b. Jesus’ **first** word to his disciples—both times he appears to them—is “peace”
 - c. He speaks this word of peace to a frightened, confused group of people whose world has been shattered

- d. He speaks this word of peace despite the fact that he could have quite justifiably condemned them for abandoning him in his darkest hour
 - e. Jesus comforts and he challenges—Thomas, and us. He acknowledges our doubt... and that he tells us to get on with it and get to work.
3. Important for us to see that this is not necessarily just a story about skepticism (as we think of the term), but a story about allegiance
- a. We tend to read stories in the Bible through our own questions, and this one is no different. Atheism and unbelief are big issues in twenty-first century, secular Canada, but these questions are not what this passage is talking about
 - b. Thomas was not saying that because he had seen Jesus perform a really impressive trick, he would now believe in a divine being that he couldn't see.
 - c. Important to note what Thomas says when he sees Jesus' hands and feet—"my Lord and my God"
 - d. In that context, "Lord" was a term reserved for the Roman Emperors who insisted on being called "Lord" (Caesar is Lord)
 - e. Christians were often persecuted not because they believed in God or gods while others did not; the emperor didn't really care what they believed about Jesus in the privacy of their own minds
 - f. **The issue was allegiance.** Declaring that "Caesar was Lord" was a way of acknowledging that your allegiance was to the empire and its methods. Thomas' declaration is a declaration of allegiance!

For Thomas, faith was not the rational construction of a "worldview" that "made sense" of the data.

Thomas and the first disciples were **responding and reacting to events** that had quite literally blown them away. They were reeling and staggering, confused and groping, elated and suddenly expectant.

The empty tomb gave them the incredibly simple and incredibly complex task of choosing their allegiance and bearing witness to what they had seen (not what they had come up with on their own!).

So where does this leave us?

It is good to be reminded that Jesus' words to Thomas are spoken to us too:

- Peace be with you
- Stop doubting, and believe, choose, bear witness

We, too, experience both the compassion and the firmness of God's voice.

It is encouraging to know that we are not the first people who have struggled to believe in what we cannot see, or who have had half-hearted and misguided allegiance to our Lord and our God, and that Jesus speak peace into our confused and confusing times as well.

At the same time, we, too, have a **choice** to make. We are faced with the choice of what we will do with this Easter Jesus.

The choice to believe is not a decision we make once and then never make again.

We must *daily* choose to believe. We must daily choose, in our thoughts, in our actions, in our choices, where our allegiance lies.

Our text this morning asks us, Where is our allegiance?

Our allegiance is demonstrated by what we do.

To choose to believe is to say that Jesus—not money, not technology, not entertainment, not sex, not influence, not knowledge and reputation, not political power, not... whatever—is Lord.

It is to choose forgiveness rather than to hold grudges; it is to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to extend grace where it is not deserved... it is to love who Jesus loved—the least, the forgotten, the powerless, the marginalized.

It is to choose to endure the trials and pains of life with joy and hope, believing that we are “more than conquerors through him who loved us” to quote Paul in Romans 8:37.

It is to live as though Jesus and his kingdom are more real than the many things that compete for our allegiance every day.

This was what the first disciples were faced with. Jesus was standing in front of them—this guy they had just seen whipped, beaten, mocked, crucified, and buried—and they had to decide where their allegiance lay.

They chose to answer with their lives.

Jesus told them that he was sending them, and so they went and spread the good news, and the church was born.

They BORE WITNESS.

So, what's glorious about faith? Quite simply, it is that we get to participate in the nature and mission of God.

The God who

- Philippians 2 describes as "emptying himself," taking on the form of a slave," "humbling himself,"
- the very Jesus who is "the image of the invisible God" according to the book of Colossians, the one in whom "all things hold together"
- the Jesus who is described as the "Word who was with God and who *was* God in the beginning of John's gospel...

...**this Jesus** continues to give himself away, entrusting himself and his message of new life and new creation to people like us.

Doubters, sinners, people who can't get our act together, people who make a mess of the message, people whose lives don't always, or even *often* seem to match the message.

We are his witnesses.

Faith is a glorious thing because the God *who redefines what glory looks like*—who shows us that glory of the kingdom of God not a triumphalistic, power-hungry thing, but the giving away of oneself—this God entrusts himself to us and gives us one another to rely on.

Finally, faith is a glorious thing because it is the path to life.

The last verse of John 20 says this:

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).

May we bear witness to our unexpected Saviour who emerges from the empty tomb, who shatters our categories and expectations of "how Gods are supposed to act," who continues to come to the word in humility and sacrifice, who entrusts himself to the unlikeliest of messengers...

... whose glory is made known as it always has been. In giving himself away.

May God help us to embrace this glorious faith—for our own sakes, and for the sake of the world.

Amen.

