

That You May Come to Believe

John 20:19-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today, we're beginning a series of four sermons that are all oriented around a question that struck me in a new way as I was pondering the sight of the windswept, dried out flowers on our Easter cross the week after Easter.

Where and how does the risen Christ show up in our world and in our lives?

Or, put differently, how does Easter hope make its way out into the world *after* Easter.

Easter Sunday is a hugely important day in the Christian calendar. It is the day that defines all the others.

Without the hope that we celebrate on Easter Sunday, the church has little reason to exist. We become little more than a social club hanging on to a bunch of dry principles or lifeless ethics with no animating spirit or truth in them.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul expresses this in brutally stark language:

[I]f Christ has not been raised, **our preaching is useless and so is your faith**. More than that, **we are then found to be false witnesses about God** (1 Cor. 15:14-15).

Strong stuff.

If Christ has not been raised, every word that I have said from this pulpit for the last eleven years is “useless,” says Paul. And all the faith that you have been able to muster over the course of your life? Just as useless.

If Christ has not been raised, all of our singing, preaching, praying—all of it is just an elaborate orbiting around the same lie. We are “false witnesses,” says Paul.

Paul finishes this famous section on the centrality of the resurrection like this:

[I]f Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. **If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied** (1 Cor. 15:17-19).

If Easter isn't real, *sin* and *death* not *God's love* have the last word in the world. We are objects of pity, Paul says, if Christ has not been raised from the dead.

Maybe you think this sounds harsh. Maybe Paul was engaging in a bit of hyperbole. Maybe he had a rush of blood to the head one Saturday night before his Sunday sermon!

Surely, even if this whole Christian show has been an elaborate deception, the church and the faith it proclaims has been a net benefit for the world, right?

I have thought this way, at times. But the longer I live, the longer I journey on the life of faith, the more the more I am convinced that Paul was absolutely right.

Easter matters. It matters more than anything else.

But how? Does it prove that God did a really cool trick once upon a time? Was Easter Sunday kind of a "one and done" thing, and now it's just business as usual until he comes again?

Or is Easter meant to spread out into the world? It is meant to add colour and shape and meaning to everything that comes in its wake.

Like this image. It's called *O Magnum Mysterium* (O Great Mystery). This is piece of art for the season of Easter in my Christian Seasons calendar in my office. I'll leave it up for the rest of the sermon.

I think Easter *is* meant to spread out into the world, like the colours emanating from this cross.

And it has. Two thousand years of Christian history have proved this. So much of Western culture would not exist if it had not been for a group of people who believed that Jesus really was victorious over the grave.

But our memories get short. We take things for granted. We don't make the connections between some of our cultural assumptions and ethics and the beliefs that made them possible.

We in the twenty-first century find faith to be less of a given than in previous periods of history. So, maybe we need a reminder.

Over the next four weeks, I'm going to be looking at four scenes from the gospels (three from John, one from Luke), four scenes after Easter, where the risen Christ shows up.

We're going to look at where Jesus shows up. And we're going to ask, what do these "showings up" mean for us today?

Today's post-resurrection appearance scene is a familiar one. It shows up in the lectionary each year after Easter. It's the story of "Doubting Thomas."

"Doubting Thomas," we call him, despite the fact that Mary and the other disciples wouldn't have believed unless they had seen Jesus either.

All the disciples didn't believe the women who first encountered the risen Christ either—it seemed to them an "idle tale."

Thomas is hardly alone in needing to see to believe. Thomas just gets a bad rap because he demanded what the others received as a surprise!

But on to the story itself. Let's set the stage:

All of the events of Holy Week are in the rear-view mirror—arrest, crucifixion, burial. Mary and the disciples have discovered an empty tomb, but in the early stages have no idea what it means (they assume someone has taken the body).

And then, Jesus appears! First to Mary, then later to the disciples (minus Thomas who was evidently out going for a walk or something).

The disciples are overjoyed. But Thomas missed the party, and he can't believe it actually happened.

I doubt many of us have a hard time putting ourselves in Thomas's shoes at this point.

It's one thing to hear that something very strange is up from others. Thomas knows that the tomb was empty. He knows that his friends say they have seen Jesus alive.

But he wants to see for himself.

Well, a week later, he gets his wish. The disciples are behind locked doors again and suddenly... Jesus is there.

“Unless I see” becomes actual seeing!

And what does Thomas see? Well, he sees a physical Jesus. He doesn't see a ghost or an apparition. He doesn't see an inspiring metaphor for hope. He doesn't see a mystical encounter with the spiritualized object of his longing.

No, he sees Jesus.

He sees the wound where the spear dug into Jesus' side. He sees the hands that had ugly metal spikes driven through them.

He sees his friend, his teacher, his Messiah—the very man that he had seen bleeding and dying on that Roman cross.

Before Christianity was ever a “world religion” or the “foundation of western culture” or a set of “doctrines” about God or anything like that, it was the stunned response to the shattering surprise of seeing and touching and hearing and eating with the risen Christ!

The early church was quite literally shocked into existence, dragged almost reluctantly and fearfully from an empty tomb and huddling behind locked doors in fear to the promise of new life.

I can almost imagine Thomas and those first believers saying, “Listen, we didn't just make any this stuff up, for who would make up a story like this?! Who could imagine or predict it? But there he was, standing there... We saw... we touched... we heard! What else can we do but speak about it?!”

And so, the first thing we can say from Scene one in our post-resurrection tour is that the risen Christ shows up in the midst of human despair, confusion, fear and disbelief.

And the risen Christ still shows up in these places.

You may have noticed that despair, confusion, fear and disbelief have not disappeared from the human landscape over the last two millennia?

This is true both outside and inside the church.

Similar to the disciples floundering around in the aftermath of what they *thought* were misplaced expectations and crushed hopes, many in the post-Christian western world are floundering.

We live in depressed, anxious, and unwell times. Meaning seems absent. Hope often seems a rare commodity.

We also live in skeptical times. We keep our options open. Like Thomas, we say we need to see it to believe it (even though many people in the secular, “spiritual but not religious” west claim to believe in all kinds of strange things that go beyond what can be proved!).

And just like two thousand years ago, the risen Christ shows up in the midst of our doubt, our fear, our confusion, our hopelessness, our despair and says, “Peace be with you.”

The risen Christ does not condemn us for our weakness. He doesn't say, “You weak coward. Where is your commitment?” or “Why didn't you believe what I told you?” or “How could you betray me?” Or even, “Why do you need to see in order to believe?”

The first word out of the risen Christ's mouth, both in his initial encounter with the disciples and here with Thomas, is “peace.”

And this is his first word to us, too.

Peace. I see you, just as you are. I know you—I know your disorientation and confusion; I know your doubt and your fear. I know all of this is hard to believe. I know that there are many things in your world and in your life that give a different message.

I know all of this. And into all of this, I say, “peace.”

But too many sermons on the story of “doubting Thomas” stop too soon.

(I say this knowing full well that many of you are thinking, “Is it *really* possible for a sermon to stop too soon?! But I shall boldly press on...)

Many sermons rightly point out that Jesus meets us in our doubts and honours our doubts. They say that the story of Thomas shows us that doubt is a part of the life of faith.

This is all true and gloriously so. Many of us are well-acquainted with forms of faith that portray doubt as faithlessness and failure or that hold up certainty as the litmus test for true faith.

This has destroyed some people's faith. And this is wrong.

We must never equate faith with certainty. If we could always be 100% certain about the things of God, faith wouldn't be "faith." It would be "sight."

And so, it *is* important to say that doubt and fear and confusion are right there in our scriptures. Jesus meets us in these places and these experiences with words of peace and understanding and compassion.

But no sermon should stop here. Because Jesus doesn't stop here.

He goes on to say, "Stop doubting, and believe" (NIV) or "Do not doubt but believe" (NRSV).

Some of us wear our doubts as a badge of honour. They prove that we aren't just dumb sheep who follow, but critical thinkers, well-educated, clear-eyed modern people.

We are well aware of Christianity's historical sins, not to mention some of the crazy things people have believed down through the ages.

We like the idea of being thought of as "progressive" or "rational" or "enlightened" or whatever term we prefer. Perhaps we're attracted to the ethic of Jesus (as we understand it), but all the miraculous and supernatural stuff leave us feeling cold or disinterested or suspicious.

We're happy to have Jesus the humble teacher along for the ride as we pursue whatever the social causes of the moment are, but we don't spend much time thinking about him as the risen and exalted Christ.

Perhaps particularly in our time and place, we need this second part of Jesus's statement to Thomas as much as the first.

We need to hear, "Peace be with you," certainly. Who doesn't? But we also need to hear, "Stop doubting. Believe. Don't be embarrassed. Don't be proud. Don't imagine that you have no need of God. Don't reduce faith to something less than it is."

There is no shortage of causes out there that clamour for our attention. You don't have to look far. They dominate our various forms of media every day. Many of these are important and worthy of serious Christian reflection and action.

But we need to get the order right. We start with Jesus, and *then* ask the question, “How does my allegiance to the risen Christ and his kingdom inform my activity when it comes to this issue.”

Too often—and this may be uniquely true in more “progressive” wings of the church—we just adopt the agenda (or agendas) given to us by the broader culture and then bring Jesus in the back door to give it all a more spiritual flavour.

If Christianity ever ceases to be first and foremost about the hope and the life and the meaning and the joy that radiated out of the discovery of that empty tomb, then I think the church will become, as Paul said, “objects of pity.” Our preaching and our faith will be useless, both for our world and for ourselves.

People do not need another political agenda, another long list of causes to be for or against, even if these come with a bit of a Jesus-y tinge. These agendas and opportunities can be found in abundance elsewhere.

What *cannot* be found elsewhere—what people need more than anything—is forgiveness. Mercy. Grace. Healing. People need to hear the truth about who they are and who God is.

And people need a hope that extends beyond what we can achieve for ourselves. I have been reminded of this in a new way this year as the latter part of Lent and the first days of Easter in our church have been coloured by death.

And so, the second thing we *must* say from Scene one in our post-resurrection tour is that the risen Christ shows up summoning us *beyond* despair, confusion, fear and disbelief, and toward belief in a God whose love and mercy and promise extend far beyond what we can imagine.

I am going to close with the words from the end of our passage this morning:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.**

It’s fascinating to think that there are all kinds of stories about Jesus that never found their way into our gospels, that the risen Christ was active beyond even what we know.

This, too, is as true today as it was then. The risen Christ cannot be contained by books. He is active in ways that explode our categories. Jesus does not run out of surprises.

But what we *do* hear. The stories of Jesus' appearance that we *do* have. The traditions we *have* inherited. All of these have a single purpose.

That we might come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that through believing, his life might become our life.

This is the point of the whole show. Life.

May God's peace meet us in our doubt and despair. And may God help us to move beyond doubt, in big ways and small ways. May God help us to believe.

Amen.

