

“Reason to Doubt”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 20:1-19
April 8, 2018
Second Sunday of Easter

Have you ever heard someone try to describe a performance of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, or St. Paul and the Broken Bones, or the Birmingham Girls Choir? Or listened patiently as a friend tries to sell you on their favorite new podcast, going on and on about how much you will love it? Or how you simply *must* check out their latest discovery on Netflix (it’s obscure and British!)? Depending on how much you trust the person’s taste, these description can be helpful, or intriguing, but they are never a substitute for actually going to the concert or watching an episode.

If you get a recommendation from someone you trust, and then somehow carve out the time in your busy life to have your own experience — only then can you bug someone else with your testimony.

And yet, poor Thomas has been called “Doubting Thomas” for centuries. It’s hardly fair. We don’t call Peter, “Triple-denier Pete” for what he did as the rooster crowed. Way back at the beginning of the gospel, Philip, wanting his friend to know that Jesus is The One, tells Nathaniel “We have found him!” And Nathaniel says “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And Philip replies, “Come and see.” We don’t call Nathaniel “Skeptical Nate” or “Elitist Nathaniel.” Yet Thomas is known for his doubt.

But he is not the only doubter here. And it is not Jesus he doubts!

Mary Magdalene came running from the tomb and told the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” — and for us it’s been a week, but if we were binge-watching this story, we’d remember that it’s only hours later that these next verses pick up. What have they done with Mary’s testimony? Clearly they have not been moved by her Easter sermon. They are hiding, with the doors locked.

Now, to be fair, their leader and rabbi had just been brutally murdered by that most sinister conspiracy of church and state. But we still might ask how this solemn assembly of disciples would look any different if Mary Magdalene *hadn’t* come and preached the good news to them. Nothing has changed for them from the hearing of her encounter.

Jesus appears and breathes on them and gives them their task — to go and to forgive sins. I notice two things here. First, this verse is usually rendered, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Except the original Greek doesn’t say “sins” twice. It literally just says: “if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if any you hold onto, they are held onto.” So you could very legitimately read it as “if you forgive sins, they’re forgiven, and anyone you embrace or hold onto will be embraced.”¹

The second thing I notice is that Jesus’s instructions here aren’t about anything beyond forgiveness. That is his

¹ Sandra Schneiders, “The Lamb of God and Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011):27 - thanks to Rev. Mary Kinkle Shore at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3619

first message to his gathered disciples — his gathered, scared, locked-in-a-room disciples. Simply: do the work of forgiveness. That is what they are being sent to do.

Thomas comes back — we don't know where he's been or when he returns — and the disciples tell him “We have seen the Lord.” But he tells them he won't believe unless he has his own encounter. He's not doubting Jesus, he's doubting this bunch of guys in a locked room, these same guys who were locked in that room even after having been told by Mary that she had seen Jesus. These guys who will still be in a locked room a week later after having had their encounter.

That's where we find them, back in the house with the doors closed. Perhaps they spent the week after Jesus breathed on them running around and forgiving sins. But John tends to not leave out details like that. Back in the house is where Jesus finds them and offers Thomas his hands and his side and Thomas exclaims “My Lord, and my God!” And Jesus offers a blessing to all who don't get to meet Jesus in this physical way, a blessing that cascades through the centuries and washes over us here this morning.

Thomas gets the “doubter” label for wanting more than to just be told Good News. He wants his own experience of what this means, and he will not just believe what those around him tell him to believe because they say it to be so. He won't sit quietly and go along with the program, with his doubts on silent mode. He needs to know the truth for himself. He's not just going to take it from a bunch of men saying that they've seen the Lord but acting scared and isolated as they say it.

Perhaps instead of a pejorative, we should be holding up “Doubting Thomas” as an example of discipleship. What if doubt is crucial to the life of faith? If there's one word I say to the children of this church more than any other when praying with them, it's *curiosity*. I tell them to “stay curious” and to “ask lots of questions” and “search” and “wrestle with big questions.” I think we've been sowing doubt here! To paraphrase Christian writer Anne Lamott: Doubt is not the enemy of faith. Certainty is.

Much energy and ink have been spent in church circles worrying about the “Nones.” You know the Nones — the fast-growing sector of American society who check “none” when asked for their religious affiliation. Part of what makes church people panic about the Nones is that they didn't just plop down in our communities from flying saucers from other planets. They're our kids and our grandkids and we did our best. We forced them to go to youth group and we tried to teach them well. We kept telling them how we'd seen the Lord. Mostly, they seem to have come out all right. But then they go and become Nones. Doubt is part of faith? Okay, but maybe we should've doubled-down on certainty.

Except when you ask the Nones why they're not affiliated, the first thing you find out is that most of them have simply moved from nominally connected to not at all. They were there, but they drifted. But then they tell you more hard-to-hear reasons they've taken on the None name. They tell you they really like science and that the church doesn't. They tell you that they see a lot of Christians doing not-very-Christian things. They see religion as divisive and causing more harm than good. They think that churches are more interested in money than in caring for people's souls. They've seen the church maneuver around scandals to protect leadership at the expense of children. They think the church is hypocritical. They've seen the church turn its back on or lash out and harm young people seeking spiritual help in figuring out who they are. They'll tell you the church is cruel to LGBTQ people².

² <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>

There might not be a None who would put it this way, but it seems to me they've encountered a whole bunch of people shouting "I've seen the Lord" from inside locked houses. They've heard the church tell wonderful stories, but too often fail to be changed by them. Too often, the church has been content to stay indoors for fear of that which is hard to do. Too often, the church has done just what the disciples did at first — ignored the call to go in search of places to pour out mercy and to give the world the experience of meeting the body of Christ.

The modern church that the Nones know doesn't face the persecution that those first disciples faced. But the Nones sure have seen it conjure up imagined persecution — any excuse to stay inside. Fear science. Fear women. Fear bodies. Fear culture. Fear new understandings of love and relationship. Fear.

"Peace be with you" is what Christ breathes into fearful houses. John concludes this chapter — and many scholars think this is where the gospel originally ended — with these words: "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."

Why does John tell us about the disciples hiding, and still hiding, and hiding yet more? Obviously they got out of the house, eventually. Obviously they finally went out and forgave sins and testified to what they had seen, and in their work others had their own experiences of the risen Christ. If they hadn't, we wouldn't be here this morning. So why share this part? Perhaps it's to help us in moments when we realize we've come home and found our fellow disciples looking inward instead of outward. Or when we realize that we are the ones locking the doors in fear.

We get the reminder to go — go as Jesus told them to go. To be willing to weigh the testimony of those who call on Christ's name against whether they are hiding...or living. And to seek our own experience of the risen Christ, so that we can cry out "My Lord and my God!"

There are future Nones in all of our churches. And I can tell you first-hand that, from time to time, Nones will check back in, just to see if you've still got the doors locked.

What would happen, dear disciples, if anyone who came peering into our houses found followers of Christ not cowering in fear, but celebrating and welcoming and staying curious and asking hard questions and wrestling with weird texts and seeking the risen Christ in every beloved child of God, no matter what they wear or what they ask us to call them or who they love or how they pray or anything else about them?

What if Jesus came back to talk to the doubters, and he found the door swinging in the wind with a note scribbled on the fridge that said "Gone forgivin' and lovin' and hopin'"? And what if he went looking for the table — because tables are his thing — and he found that it had been taken from the dining room and set out in the middle of the road with bread and cups piled high, enough to share with anyone who wanted to know more?