

May 1, 2022

John 20: 24-31

Your Way, Your Time

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

When you were a child, who did you ask for help with homework?

Who could tell you what that weird knocking sound on your first car was?

Who would tell you if those shoes didn't go with that dress?

Who taught you how to swing a bat, spike a ball, or do a pike with a one and half twist?

Who answered your questions about what happens when someone dies or where babies come from?

If you grew up in the church, who did you go to when you had questions about the Bible?

Later, we will see a slideshow that includes pictures you've given us of some of these people, the ones who nurtured us as children and the ones who are nurturing DCC children today, the ones who were around when we had a million questions and weren't afraid to ask all of them. These are the people who have helped us grow into the people we are today.

What about now, though, as an adult, who do you ask when you have a question about the Bible or about God today?

How would it feel if, when you asked that person a question, they said, "Stop asking questions and just believe."? I know from talking to some of you that you've experienced that and it affected how you felt about the Church and what you thought about God.

Christian writers are writing a lot these days about the decline of the mainline protestant church. Everyone wants to figure out how to turn this sinking ship around and so, over the years, various groups have asked people who have left the Church, why they left. I was reminded this week that one of the reasons people cite is that they asked their pastors questions that either they couldn't or wouldn't answer. I find that fascinating because it has never occurred to me that I had the option not to answer people's questions. I mean...isn't that what I'm supposed to do? *And* it never occurred to me that questions, even the ones that challenge something I've said or believe, were anything other than opportunities

for both the questioner and the answerer to grow and learn. After all, I've never pretended that what I say must be true for everyone. What I say is true for me, based on my experiences, which includes a Master of Divinity. Given that seminary-trained ministers spend a lot of money on their education, I wonder, why would a pastor not want to answer people's questions? I don't know the answer to that for every pastor, but I did get a window into one possible answer a few years back.

When I started seminary, I was a youth minister at a Presbyterian Church. In my seminary classes, I was learning all kinds of cool things about the Bible, like Paul didn't write all the letters attributed to him and Genesis had many authors in different time periods, and lots of Christians don't believe in a virgin birth or physical resurrection. I don't remember which of these pearls of wisdom I was talking about with my boss, the senior minister, but I asked him what he had learned in seminary about that thing and when he told me he learned the same thing I had learned, having sat through many of his sermons, I asked, "Why don't you tell the people sitting in the pews what you learned in seminary?" And I will never forget it, he said, "They don't want to know."

I don't believe that. I think people want to know what scholars say. I think they want the opportunity to think about what they believe and why and even change their mind sometimes. This is why Christian community is so important. It is in community that we learn from each other's views and beliefs, that we ask questions and hopefully get answers. Some of you have been around long enough to remember when DCC and St. James Catholic Church down the street enjoyed Bible studies together. Father Bill Skeehan was the priest at St. James in those days. He wrote a couple of books, one of them called, *At This Time*. In it he talked about the importance of community amid a world that has gone a bit off the rails, he wrote, "In our troubled days and a world full of madness, it is vital that we have the opportunities to restore...community life... [and] bring about---through community---the transformation of the world."¹ Today's text gives us a great opportunity to celebrate the gift of safe community where we can ask questions as part of our faith journeys and acknowledge that we are all on our own journey and God shows up to each of us differently. We have a lot to learn from each other.

¹ Skeehan, Bill, *At This Time*, Meddlers Books, Bartlesville, OK, 125.

If you were to look up John 20: 24-31 in a children's story bible, it would likely be titled, "Doubting Thomas." And if you asked most people if doubting, when it has to do with faith, is a good thing, they would generally say no. They would say that doubt, in fact, is the opposite of faith. Today, I would like us to consider two things. First, are we really that different from Thomas? And second, can we accept that questions and doubt are part of our faith journeys, and stop getting hung up on their being a one size fits all "right answer"? Can we embrace the idea that faith is about growing and loving? What we believe about God ought to inform what we believe about human beings and how we live our lives. Faith is not a creed we recite or a test we must pass, so let's relax into that this morning.

This is the story of Thomas, John 20:24-31.

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ 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.

The beginning of this story refers to the text we talked about last week when the scared disciples encountered Jesus while they were in a locked room, hiding from the authorities who had Jesus killed. In today's text, we learn that Thomas was not present for that. So, when the disciples told him about their encounter, Thomas was like, "I will believe it when I see it for myself." And for that, he has been labeled "Doubting Thomas." But let's not forget, we talked last week about how the disciples locked in a room and hiding makes it seem as if they doubted what Mary Magdalene told them about her encounter with Jesus at the tomb. If they had believed her, surely, they would have been out looking for Jesus. Instead, just

like Thomas, it was not until the disciples saw Jesus's hands and side for themselves that they believed something new was happening. You might be wondering, "How was Thomas different from the rest of the disciples?" He wasn't any different at all. They all wanted to see for themselves.

You see, Christian tradition has judged Thomas harshly because he had questions. And tradition, whether intentionally or not, has used his story to teach us that we cannot be curious and faithful at the same time. Too often, when we question what the Bible says or when we come to believe something different from what we were taught, we fear, often based on the comments of other Christians, that it means we are losing faith. We fear what other people think. Will they label us heretics?

Perhaps most importantly, we worry, what will God think? We put God in a small box and assume that God's ego is as frail as ours, that asking questions and expressing doubt will wound God. The truth is, asking questions demonstrates a willingness to learn and grow and those are good things. We are supposed to do that. Spiritual growth is even one of this church's core values. And here, in the story of Thomas, we read that Jesus did not greet Thomas's curiosity by calling him a heretic or berating him for wanting to see for himself. Instead, Jesus treated Thomas with compassion and patience. The author of John's Jesus seemed to understand that Thomas needed his own experience.

The same is true for all of us. Each of us is on our own journey. What we believe about God, Jesus, the Bible, spirituality in general, will change over time...and it should. Our life experiences ought to shape how we think about God and what we believe God is up to in the world. **Life should teach us about the Life-giver.**

I recognize that for some people this seems scary or a little bit too loosey goosey. Some of us were raised in traditions that have us thinking there is a theological equivalency to Roberts Rules of Order and that we best demonstrate our faith by obeying all the rules. But what if we demonstrate our faith by showing curiosity and by encountering God in our own ways as we live into who we were created to be? What if we woke up every day and said, "Show me who you are today, God." And then we paid attention to what God shows us. I mean...that's essentially what Thomas wanted from Jesus, "Jesus, show me who you are."

In case we still don't get it, at the end of today's text, the author of John tells readers clearly who he believed Jesus was. He wrote, "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." (John 20:30-31) These verses invite us to remember that the Bible is not an exhaustive and comprehensive retelling of events. Right there it tells us that there are things Jesus did that were not written about in this book. The author wrote what he wanted readers to know about Jesus and his early followers from his own unique perspective. His narrative was written for a very specific purpose. Clearly, not so we would have a complete picture of what Jesus's life was like as if this was a biography. No, this book was written, "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is us the Messiah the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name." The author wrote for one reason and one reason only.

Let me explain by using an example that pops up in our world today a lot. In the last few years, there has been a lot of conversation about media bias. From memes to news articles to podcasts, media shapes our understanding of the world. Often without realizing it, media compels us to act or think in certain ways. If you spend much time on social media, you have probably seen the graphic on the screen. (Graphic Source-Ad Fontes Media: <https://adfontesmedia.com/>)

It situates well-known media sources on the chart based on how conservative or liberal the source is and on whether what is presented is primarily fact based or opinion based and unintentionally or intentionally misleading.

I won't dwell here long because I don't want to venture into partisan territory but hang with me for a minute.

You can see on this slide that I have drawn a purple box around the sources that Vanessa Otero, the creator of this graphic and founder of Ad Fontes Media, has deemed neutral and fact-based. I recognize that Ms. Otero, like all of us, is not without bias herself. Similarly, we cannot help but note most media sources are outside the purple box which means most of the media sources being consumed currently are biased in some way.

Bias is not inherently bad. Bias is about different perspectives. Bias is different from having an agenda. Agenda, in this example, is about what a news or research

organization is set up to *do*. The problem comes when a media source presents itself as a fact-based news source, but it is really set up to promote a specific viewpoint or to advocate for a specific group. A media source's agenda is much more important in determining trustworthiness than the bias of an individual within the organization. Knowing what a news source's agenda is, helps us to know what to do with the information we receive from them.

The same is true when it comes to the Bible. Each writer had his own perspective or bias and his own agenda, his "why" for writing. The author of John was up front about both his bias and his agenda. From his perspective, Jesus was the Messiah and he wanted his readers to believe that too. Specifically, though, he wanted his original audience to believe. Remember, the people in his community were alienated from Jewish community because of what they believed about Jesus; they were living amid Roman oppression and staring at the rubble of the destroyed temple every day. They were isolated and afraid. The author of John wrote to give those specific people hope that one day the world Jesus came to reveal would come to be and, in his mind, it would be because his followers believed the right things.

And honestly, I don't think that's entirely wrong. I think the world Jesus talked about will come to be, but I don't think it will be because we all believe exactly the same things about Jesus's life and death. I think it will be because we believe the same things about what God intended for the world God created, which is what Jesus lived and died trying to get people to see. The world will be different when the followers of Jesus remember that each of us was created in the image of a loving God and that we were created for community, to love and be loved. When we do, racist systems will be dismantled. All loving, consensual relationships will be honored. All people will be treated with dignity and respect and afforded access to the healthcare they need and choose. People will share what they have and see that the amassing of wealth and looking out for number one is not what life is about. Life is about relationships.

From the very beginning, Christianity has been shaped by people who believed in a God that wanted a relationship with human beings, knowing full well that we ask a lot of questions, change our minds, and learn best through experience. Those early Christian communities gathered for meals and spent time discussing

their sacred texts. They learned about God and about Jesus from each other by asking questions and answering them together.

Just like them, we are all on our own journey with God and with other people. And hopefully, we grow a little closer to both people and God as we walk along. Life is about relationships, not about knowing all the right answers or believing exactly the same things, but about looking for answers together and nurturing curiosity and generosity. Community life prioritizes loving each other. And when we do that well, God will see that we understood the assignment. Amen.