

2nd Sunday of Easter (3Apr15)
John20:19-31

Next week we'll hear an epilogue added later. But in the original version, this was the end of John's Gospel—a summary statement, a final hurrah for the story.

As the concluding capstone, this offers John's definitive vision for us. Similarly, Matthew has the Great Commission of "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them...and I am with you always" and Luke has the Emmaus story, with a form of worship seeing Jesus in Scriptures and in Communion even when we can't see him otherwise. (Mark's Gospel, for whatever reason, doesn't follow this pattern with such shaping and guidance from Jesus.)

In this culminating message, John gives a structure we may use for absorbing these final words: Thomas is pejoratively known as "Doubting" Thomas from the line of Jesus saying "do not doubt but believe." But actually the original Greek says "do not become unbelieving but believing" or "don't persist in mistrust but be trusting." So let's follow that pattern John commends to us as both what faith is and what it isn't, or how it doesn't and does.

I've picked up ten of these areas in the reading. It could be ten because, in spite of liking Colbert, I still miss Letterman's Top Ten lists. Or it might be that while my grandpa used to give three point sermons, though I am terser and briefer than he was, I'm also more scatter-brained.

At any rate, without further ado, ten things from this Gospel reading on what our faith is and

isn't, about how we do or don't come to believe, of what we reject and affirm. Here's the list, which we'll explore and explain more:

1. not other days, but Sundays
2. not individualistic, but communal
3. not self-originating, but received
4. not only receiving, but giving
5. not exclusionary, but accessible
6. not safe, but vulnerable
7. not morally superior, but forgiving
8. not supernatural, but earthy
9. not charming, but unattractive
10. not unbelieving, but believing

(1) Both parts of this reading are set on "the first day of the week," on Sunday. Partly that coincidence is since Easter was on Sunday. More fully, this probably reflects what was already standard practice from the earliest times, that church met on Sunday. We come to believe by being in church. Said another way, more than a Tuesday afternoon or Friday night, the important moments of faith where your convictions are fostered are likely to happen here and now. Flowing from that, we notice:

(2) Church is a communal gathering, a place of relationships. The reading's repeated refrain is Jesus three times saying "Peace be with you." That seems to indicate it takes practice being in community. Still, we keep working on reconciling and remaining together because you can't be church alone. Evidently God finds you more in a group than individually. At least partly, that aspect matters because

(3) faith is not self-originating but comes from each other. The disciples were breathed on by Jesus, and then he explicitly sent them to do the same for others. Now, they couldn't

force Thomas believe. We all probably have experiences wishing we could but knowing we can't totally hand faith on to *make* somebody else believe exactly how we want them to. Nevertheless, faith's foundation is in hearing the stories, in learning from each other, by some preacher's voice. God speaks through each other. We can't come up with it on our own or find our way to what we need to believe but receive it from the shared faith of community. We're mutually indebted to and mutually responsible for each other. That points inevitably to...

(4) Faith is not only received, but given. It is heard, and also spoken. This is a two-way street. No spectator sport, faith begs for your committed involvement. We'll say more about forgiveness at #7, but for now we can note that God's work is somehow dependent on us. When Jesus gives you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, in traditional language, saying that whatever you forgive is forgiven as if by God's own voice, that seems to indicate you had better get on speaking forgiveness and offering God's grace and proclaiming God's love, because there are people who need to hear it. If you don't do it, it may not get done. Or at least you'll be missing out on the really cool chance that God speaks through you. Talking of missed opportunity:

(5) With a show of hands: who wasn't here for worship last week? You might be in company with Thomas. He missed the main gathering of the resurrection on Easter. But faith is not like a fishing trip of "you should've been here last week" or a sense that you had to be there or you've missed out forever. It involves commitment, yet it does not reject those who

have been absent. It remains accessible. There is always room for newcomers who haven't been part of the group before, another chance at the good news, still time for Jesus to find you and bring you to believing. This isn't about being a charter insider versus permanent outsider. Speaking of outsiders, though,

(6) we also have to notice that Jesus busts through locked doors to come into the midst of the believers hunkered in fear, intruding on the barriers they were trying to erect. So faith does not keep enemies at bay or avoid strangers. It isn't only being where we feel most comfortable, nor about security and that internal sense of sanctuary. Faith involves vulnerability, uncertainty, some accepting discomfort. We can never set up impermeable borders or airtight resolutions. Even if we put up "Keep out, no trespassing" signs, there will always be new questions that invade. We should never try to claim a place where Jesus isn't allowed or couldn't be present. Maybe that's also part of why we keep practicing peace here, why Jesus has to keep repeating it, because we're so apt to be fearful and wanting to view others in the worst light. Yet Jesus comes to find us when we're scared and confused and also to interrupt our segregations and prejudice and bigotry and resentments. Like you can't be church alone, you can't be well or have the fullness of God's shalom in isolation. That, then, also makes central

(7) the practice of forgiveness. Our faith is constructed not in trying to be holier than thou, trying to be more morally upright, to do more good deeds, or claiming to be the most philanthropic. Comparing ourselves against others, we might not stack up very well. More

vitality, church quickly loses its purpose. If you're only here to learn how you ought to live, much less if you're here wanting to think that you're better than or better off than others, you'll discover rather quickly you might do just as well elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you recognize that you need grace, need room to keep trying, need someplace where you'll be loved even when you fall short, then this place of forgiveness is precisely for you, and is a good place for you to continue trying to comprehend and embody that forgiveness for the sake of others, too. You are, after all, no angels. You're only human, as they say. That being human certainly connects into

(8) and (9) (Let's get two out of the way in one fell swoop.) In the story, Jesus shows up with both breath and nail marks in his hands, bodily stuff. Ours is not an escapist ethereal faith, not the elitism of a heavenly spiritual vision, but the very living, breathing, flesh and blood actuality of this life. It isn't first supernatural, not above nature, but is natural. It is earthy. It is tangible and touchable.

This is the great thing about Thomas' insistence on touching Jesus. When he missed out on that first Easter resurrection gathering, the other disciples were commissioned as agents of God, they were told they had authority to forgive sins, they were breathed on by Jesus, received the Holy Spirit. That's pretty amazing stuff. Yet Thomas doesn't ponder whether he, too, is sent as an apostle, whether he can forgive, whether he will get the Holy Spirit. No, his protest is that he wants to touch Jesus. If we don't understand that our faith involves actual lives and actual bodies and actual eating, we've

missed it. We can't avoid it for the so-called spiritual stuff. The Spirit finds her way to you in your very regular life.

But it's also kind of gross that Thomas wanted to touch the nail marks, right? That's the other part of this fleshy faith. This isn't only for beautiful bodies or for immaculate moments of life or the charmingly attractive. Our God spends a lot of time and energy where things are ugly and hurting and life is struggling. Which all seems utterly foolish: why would we want to spend time on faith that is unattractive, that isn't attracting us? God finds you and keeps striving not only in serene beauty, but in the worst moments. Well, that brings us to

(10), which also brings us back to the beginning: do not be unfaithful but faithful. Don't remain distrusting, but become trusting. This is very different than claiming that belief equals not doubting. This is about a trajectory of openness, about leaving the question open, about what you practice. A genuine, investigating, inquiring faith is always becoming, searching for more. Yet if you resist, digging in your heels, avoiding the surprises, you may very well not be surprised, find an answer closed. If you expect to be disappointed, most likely you will be. But if you expect to believe, if you keep your skepticism and suspicion, your openness and availability to this peculiar mystery at work in and around us, then you may just wind up encountering Jesus and this God who

1. shows up especially on Sundays
2. finding us in community,
3. in what we receive from
4. and give to each other,

5. the God who is not exclusionary about attendance, but continues to be accessible as you arrive here

6. to practice exploring the vulnerable edges,

7. of not feeling morally superior, but with the hard but fruitful task of forgiveness

8. just as it is shared by this strange God who isn't sought in the supernatural, but Jesus who is in the fleshy, earthiness of our lives,

9. in your worst moments and biggest struggles, through scars and sufferings and cross.

10. To find this strange God in these strange ways amid this strange community, you'll have to practice not unbelieving, but believing, which is why we keep repeating the weird Word: Alleluia! Christ is risen!