

April 23, 2017
2nd Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

WHAT IF?

Each of the four Gospels has a slightly different version of the resurrection. In Luke's version, several women went to the tomb and encountered angels who told them that Jesus had risen and reminded them that he had told them that it would happen. According to Luke, when the women reported their experience, the male disciples just blew them off. No one believed them. Luke 24:11.

According to John's version (that we read last Sunday) only Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb and encountered Jesus there. He told her to go tell the other disciples what had happened. John doesn't expressly say that no one believed Mary's tale about having an actual conversation with the risen Lord, but we do know that there they all are, many hours later. Hunkered down in a room with the doors locked. Whatever they were thinking, no one had jumped up and gone looking for him. Read John 20:19-31.

One of the greatest privileges of being a pastor is walking with someone through their final stage of life. It didn't surprise me early in my ministry that Christians facing death are not fearful or anxious about it. They say things like: "I have had a good life, God has been good to me and I am ready now to go." Some are so ready, the only anxiety they express is what is taking so long.

What was a surprise though was how often someone who I knew to be a devout, cradle to grave Christian would express some, I don't know the precise word to describe it, but trepidation I guess about meeting Jesus. I've had conversations with the most generous, caring people, people who didn't just talk the talk of being Christian, but truly walked the walk. But in their final days, they need to talk about something in their past that they regret. It might be a single bad

choice when they were young and foolish. It might be a more generalized concern that they have not fully lived up to their understanding of what Jesus expected of them.

When that happens, we can talk about the most basic essentials of our faith: that Christ died for us and for our salvation. That through his death and resurrection we are assured of his unconditional forgiveness and ultimately eternal life in his presence, joining our voices with the choirs of angels who forever sing to the glory of his holy name. Sometimes just that reminder will put their heart and mind at ease. But sometimes, I get the feeling that there is a lingering “yes but.” They have the head knowledge, but maybe something in their hearts says “I can’t help but worry about meeting him face to face. He knows all about me.”

Maybe that was part of what was going on with the disciples. Now, John does suggest that they are gathered together out of fear that the religious authorities who had managed to get the Roman government to crucify Jesus, are going to do the same to them. That is certainly a legitimate fear. But maybe there was more to it.

You have to think that John and Peter at least didn’t just write Mary off as a teller of idle tales. They had seen the empty tomb themselves and the neatly folded death shroud that would not have been left there by a grave robber. They’ve been sitting around all day thinking about what they saw and what Mary told them. They are probably remembering the things Jesus said before he died that they did not understand at the time about how he would be **handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.**" Luke 24:7

They at least doubt what Mary had told them, or they wouldn’t be holed up in the locked room. And if it happened the way Luke described it, they are definitely all a bunch of doubters. *But, even then*, their doubt has got to be

tempered with “what if?” What if he did rise from the grave?” What does that mean for them. It means they are going to have to face him.

Every one of them, not just Peter, had insisted to Jesus at the last supper, that they would never abandon him. They all said they would follow him to prison and even to death. But as soon as he was arrested, every one of them had disappeared into the woodwork. He went through all that pain and sorrow and death all alone while they cowered in the shadows. What if, they did that to him and now he is alive somehow and he’s coming back to ask them: “*Where were you? You promised not to abandon me that way. Why did you do it?*” Maybe they are more afraid of meeting him face to face than they are worried about the Romans.

But then he is there. There is no more doubt and in the next instant there is no more fear. There are no words of recrimination from Jesus. He says “Peace be with you.” And the disciples rejoiced. **Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."** ²² **When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.**

This part of the story gets overlooked a lot because for some reason everybody loves to talk about the second part of the story involving the disciple named Thomas. Poor old Thomas. After Judas, he’s the most maligned disciple in the Bible. There is a little story about two disciples sitting at the bar, one says to the other, “I don’t get it, nobody says ‘denying Peter’ or ‘ran away naked Mark.’” The other disciple says “you’ve got a point Thomas, but get over it, it’s time to move on.” Everybody knows about the guy who didn’t believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Doubting Thomas. But what about the rest of them and what about the rest of us?

All of those guys were doubting before Jesus appeared to them. Speaking for myself and a whole lot of people I have listened to when they are nearing the

end of life, or even just struggling with the state of their faith life, doubt among Christians is rampant.

I was raised in a tradition that thought you could scare the doubt out of people. They told children it was a sin against Jesus to doubt and you could burn in hell forever if you doubted. It was one of the teachings that turned me away from the church. I doubted. I couldn't help it.

Jesus said to Thomas, "*blessed are those who have not seen yet believe.*" He didn't say "blessed are those who never doubt." He also never said either to Thomas or to the other disciples, you have offended me with your doubt.

And what about that fear? The fear the disciples had, that Thomas surely felt, that Mary felt before Jesus called her by name in the garden outside the empty tomb? That fear instantly disappears when we encounter the risen Lord, be it in this life or the next.

Jesus speaks nothing but words of comfort and forgiveness. When he found them in their locked room, cowering in fear, he gave them peace and the breath of the Spirit. Pure, complete comfort, assurance and forgiveness. And he has been doing it ever since. Because he lives. Our redeemer lives and so we live, be it in this life or the next, comforted and assured of his forgiveness and everlasting love.