

Sermon for Sunday, April 27, 2014 Easter II John 20:19-31 "Believe"

"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."

I suspect that we all have a little bit of the apostle Thomas in us. We want concrete proof of things, because we have been trained to believe what we can see or feel or touch or prove using scientific methods or math. It's how we are trained in school, and we hate it when we are faced with things that don't fit neatly into a scientific proof.

And so when we hear this story of Thomas, who wasn't around when Jesus came back to visit the disciples after his death and didn't believe their recounting of this visit – how could it be? – we become distinctly uncomfortable because we know that Thomas is portrayed as a man whose faith is weak, even though we probably would react the same way if we had been in the situation that Thomas was in.

Let's reset the story and see how it feels to be Thomas.

Imagine your brother is dying of cancer, an awful cancer that has stripped his body of all energy and health so now he is a mere skeleton with skin stretched like brittle parchment over the frame. You love him, and pray he would get better – a miracle, please God! – but no miracle comes. Then you pray that God would take him because he is so sick and will not get better and it is hard to even go to visit him, with the smell of the sickroom about him and no more words to say...and finally, mercifully, he dies. His spirit leaves his body – is there anything so still as one who is dead? – and you set about the hard work of the aftermath, having his body cremated, having the memorial service, and then having his ashes interred. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Your heart is broken, but you soldier on.

A couple of weeks pass. The ache is still there, like a toothache that cannot be relieved, but instead of a sharp insistent flame in your jaw, it is a dull steady ache in your heart. You can ignore it for a while, but it grumbles away under the surface, flaring up when you have to call the insurance company, or when you try to figure out how to shut down his Facebook page.

You go join some friends at the pub on a Friday night, thinking maybe a beer will dull the pain for a while. You know that's not the best idea, but whatever...

...and as you get to the pub, your friends say "You will NOT believe what happened today. Remember, when you were over making a sales call to the Framwell account? Your brother walked into the office, looking for you! It was wild, man! We couldn't believe it, but sure enough, it was him. I cannot BELIEVE you missed him!"

You don't know whether to slug the guy who's told you this or to laugh or to cry. A cruel joke, this. What the heck are they thinking? Can't they see how much you're hurting?

But they insist. It's not a joke, your brother was here, he is ALIVE, man, ALIVE!

And now you get mad. This is all nonsense. And you say, "I don't believe you. Unless I see him myself, touch him, hear him talk to me, unless I see the scar from his PIC line, unless I see his limp from when he jumped into the fishing hole when we were kids, I won't believe it. You guys are full of it, or else you're crazy."

Of course, because what they're telling you is crazy. You're a rational human being. You saw your brother die. You identified his body when they took it to the Cremation Society so they would be sure the name matched the person. You prayed and cried and buried him. So your response is the rational one: this is impossible, and I won't believe it until I see it for myself.

Just like Thomas. Because Thomas was a rational man, too. And he thought his fellow disciples all went a little bonkers – too long hiding out in fear of the Romans, maybe. So he said what he said, just like you or I would say the same thing.

And then something happened. Something utterly irrational. Jesus showed up. And he invited Thomas to put his fingers into the wounds, just to give him the empirical evidence he was calling for to prove that it really was Jesus.

And Thomas was invited into the mystery that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Mysteries...we don't much like mysteries, because we cannot wrap our minds around them. We cannot prove them. They don't fit the rules of our understanding of the world, and yet they occur. But Christ keeps inviting us into mysteries. It would be so much easier if he didn't, but he keeps on doing it.

The great physicist Richard Feynman once said "It does no harm to the mystery to know a little about it." I think of that quotation every time I am invited by Christ into another one of those mysteries...because it requires me to think a lot harder about a mystery than is comfortable. Especially because it is unlikely that I will figure out the mystery.

When I was in seminary, I took a class called Systematic Theology with a brilliant teacher. Here's the big joke about that class: we may think that if we try, we can come up with a system to understand God – thus the name Systematic Theology. But our human attempts to come up with a Grand Unified Theory of God, a system to understand the mysterious vastness that is God, always fail. Because God is more than we can imagine. More than we can comprehend.

And oftentimes writers will say that since we cannot use scientific principles to prove God, since we cannot come up with the Grand Unified Theory of God, that God does not exist.

But hear what Feynman, who was writing about science when he wrote the prior sentence I quoted to you, said about the work that he did: "If you thought that science was certain – well, that is just an error on your part."

But if science isn't certain, if the nature of the work is a continual exploration of mysteries that we may never know completely, then why do we expect science to answer our questions about the mystery of God?

Because here's the thing: science is all about exploring incomprehensible possibilities, and nowadays, science plays most creatively in areas that are very difficult to prove using the methods and technologies at hand. We may have had a brief glimpse of the Higgs Boson, we may theorize about dark matter and string theory, but much of what is now being put forth as scientific hypotheses may not be proven in our lifetime, or possibly even ever.

How is that different from being invited into a mystery? Not at all.

I do not know how Christ rose from the dead. It's a mystery, a miracle attested to in Holy Scripture. But more importantly, I know why he did...to rescue us from ourselves and all the incredibly stupid things we do to damage our relationship with our creator.

That first quote from Feynman? Perhaps it would be helpful if you hear it in the context of the paragraph in which it sits: "The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination - stuck on this carousel my eye can catch one-million-year-old light. It does no harm to the mystery to know a little about it." And this from a physicist who said he was an atheist...doesn't it sound like systematic theology to you?

We only know a little about mysteries that are placed before us. We are encouraged to explore them, wonder about them, ask questions, struggle with them.

Did you notice that when Jesus comes back for his little return visit to Thomas, Jesus doesn't berate him or make him feel bad about the whole "unless I put my fingers into the wounds" business. He simply says, "yes, I know this is hard to understand. Come on over and do what you said you needed to do, so you can start to wrap your head around this mystery. Let me help you to believe." Jesus is not in the business of making those who struggle with the mysteries feel bad about themselves. He simply gives them what they need to start to believe.

The resurrection is a hard thing for us to understand. Some faithful Christians struggle their whole lives with it. But every now and again, Jesus says, "it does no harm to the mystery to know a little about it" and gives us a flash of insight into it. Not the whole picture – we're not ready – but enough so that we can say "my Lord and my God. I don't understand the mystery yet, but I feel it a bit more now. I believe. Thank you."

Amen.