New Birth into a Living Hope 2020

1 Peter 1:3-9 John 20:19-20, 24-31

1 Peter 1:3-9 (NRSV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-20, 24-31 (NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.”

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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.” 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.

As a college freshman, away from home and on my own,

 I took a little side-trip along my spiritual journey

 by participating in a fairly fundamentalist church for a while.

 I was attracted by their a**bsolute certainty about everything**,

 which they said was a reflection and testimony

 to how much they really loved and trusted Jesus.

At first there was something very compelling

 about their obvious commitment and absolute religious confidence.

 The faith they professed was very simple and clear,

 and they could quote a Bible verse to fit any situation.

But eventually I left and broke fellowship with that group

 because when I’d try to understand by asking

 a question that was a little bit deeper or more complex,

 or that didn’t fit with their simple, pat answer ---

 let’s just say, it wasn’t well received.

 They warned me that Satan was using my questions and doubts, because I didn’t love Jesus and trust the Bible enough,

 and that I was becoming a “Doubting Thomas”.

Maybe so, but when I read about Thomas in the Gospel of John,

 **I think that their perspective was missing the point**.

The passage today is a story that began on the first day of Easter.

 The women have already rushed back from the empty tomb

 to tell the disciples that Jesus is alive – He is risen!

According to Luke’s gospel, when the women told the disciples

 about the empty tomb and what the angels had told them,

 they thought it was an idle tale and did not believe it.

The disciples, anxious and afraid of the religious leaders,

 fearfully hid, and were sequestered behind locked doors. vs. 19-20

 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear … Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

But one of the disciples, Thomas, was not with the others,

 and he missed that Easter appearance of the risen Lord.

Later on, when the other disciples tell Thomas what they had seen,

 he’s not buying their story about a resurrection,

 any more than they had believed it

 when the women first told them about the empty tomb

 and explained what the angels had said to them.

Thomas knew that after a Roman scourging, crucifixion and burial,

 people don't come back alive, and so he is adamant,

 unless I can see, touch and feel, I will not believe --

 -- show me some evidence and only then will I believe.

**Now there are different kinds of doubt and doubters in this world.**

 Sometimes rigid and deliberate disbelief masquerades as doubt.

It’s not doubt, but actually they have already made up their mind,

 and no amount of evidence, true facts or data can dissuade them

 from what they have already determined to believe as truth.

Thomas had a different sort of doubt, he had doubt with integrity—

 - show me the data, let me evaluate the facts and evidence,

 - show me the risen Lord, and then I will believe.

The Lord honors and graciously responds to that kind of doubt,

 **… which is the grace we see in this post-resurrection story.**

Next scene: It is now the week after Easter Sunday

 and Jesus appears to the gathered disciples again.

Only this time Thomas is among those gathered in fellowship… vs. 26-28

 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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

"My Lord and my God!"

 This is the strongest and most explicit affirmation of faith

 to be found anywhere in the whole of John's gospel.

 From his prior position of questioning, denial and doubt,

 now Thomas speaks this sure and most certain statement of faith.

Also notice that Jesus does not condemn Thomas for having doubted,

 but rather Jesus responds to his request,

 and gives Thomas exactly what he needs to see, to touch…

 … whatever it will take for Thomas to believe.

As I have read and studied this passage, and having observed

 how difficult it can be for some people to accept and believe,

 I’ve thought how much simpler evangelism would be

 if God had made faith and believing a little bit easier.

 **But I’m pretty sure it’s all a part of God’s plan and purpose,**

 **a deliberate process necessary for spiritual development.**

Our honest doubt and uncertainties are actually **a gift from God,**

 an invitation to explore further along our spiritual journey

 as we search for truth and a deeper walk with our Lord Jesus,

 **which equips us to flourish even amid the storms of life**.

To doubt can mean that we're taking God seriously, not frivolously,

 **by exploring** our own faith and walking **our own** spiritual journey,

 rather than just blindly accepting **the faith of someone else**.

God wants to have a relationship with us, --- a real relationship,

 -- for us to actually know our God in a deep and personal way,

 and for us to choose to walk **with our God who loves us** …

… and it will be from our struggles with honest questions and doubts

 that we can come **to know and love our God in that more personal way**.

I also believe that with deliberate purpose toward our growth,

 God may give us **more than we can handle**, including messy doubts,

 which **forces** us to learn about trust & reliance on the Lord alone…

 … as we’re learning to recognize and to respond to

 God’s grace at work in our lives and in this world.

Year ago, a promising young man was about to graduate from high school

 who wasn’t receiving much support or encouragement at home

 to continue his education, to be involved at church,

 or to focus on building a strong and faithful future.

 So I got involved and challenged him

 to think about what sort of man he wanted to become

 with his potential, what he wanted to achieve in life.

I encouraged him to get all the education he could,

 and be a man of high morals, integrity and good character

 whose walk of faith continues to grow, deepen and mature

 toward a productive and meaningful life and career …

 … and not so much just for his own sake and satisfaction,

 **but also for the well-being of his future family,**

 **the wife and children he hoped to have someday.**

The point was, that the way he chose

 to respond to the blessings and challenges of his life

 was working toward something that was not present now,

 but yet very real, something he could expect later…

… so strive now toward the family and life he wanted someday.

That is also a picture of our Christian faith and hope,

 the grace we’ve received is a foretaste of God’s ongoing work,

 as the Lord continues to deepen our faith, as in 1st Peter, vs. 8-9

 Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1st Peter was written during a difficult time of severe persecution,

 the Emperor Nero was attempting to crush & destroy Christianity.

The focus of 1st Peter is how the resurrection of Jesus from the dead

 gives us courage and hope amid our present difficulties

 moving us toward our future as promised by the Lord… vs. 1-3

 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great

mercy he has given us a new birth into **a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Blessed be God, may seem like a very odd statement to write

 to someone struggling with intense persecution and suffering,

 **but the point is,**

 **because we trust, we can have confidence, gratitude & hope**

 **in anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promises,**

 **and that enables us to live fully and boldly in the present**

regardless of our current situation, be it chaos or comfort.

 Though in the present we’re not immune or exempt from suffering,

 and no, we do not escape from the trials & troubles of this world…

**… yet seen from our distinctly Christian perspective,**

 we are sustained by hope and trust in God’s promises,

 that await fulfillment as our reliable inheritance,

 which gives us courage, confidence and reassurance…

… because we know that through our struggles, trials and troubles,

 God is accomplishing something in us that is purposeful, vs. 6-7

 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

The promise is, the struggles we face  **all serve God’s plan for us**,

 which reveals and strengthens the authenticity of our faith,

 --- just as gold is tested and purified by fire.

**Our struggles are the way that God enlarges our vision and hope,**

 just as a good teacher uses research papers and testing,

 to help their students grow and learn to think more deeply.

God uses the struggles, trials and troubles of our lives,

 all of our experiences for our benefit toward Christian maturity,

 **by challenging our easy answers and assumptions,**

 **and making us grow our spiritual development deeper.**

An essential part of authentic Christian faith is our struggle,

 for we grow by asking and confronting the hard questions of faith,

 **within the community of faith**, within our church family,

 where we work out our answers with God and with each other…

**… which leads to how this passage concerning Thomas applies to us.**

1st, God was faithful and provided for Thomas’ doubt and questioning.

 Notice that Jesus does not condemn Thomas for having doubted,

 but rather Jesus stoops down and meets him where he was,

 **to give Thomas exactly what he needs to see, to touch…**

 **… whatever it took for Thomas to believe.**

2nd, On that the Sunday after Easter, though Thomas doubted,

 yet he was still there with the other disciples.

 He was still a part of their fellowship,

 even though they didn’t all agree or believe.

 It is critically important that they didn't

 reject, exclude or excommunicate him even when he doubted.

 They gave him **time enough** and **room enough** to explore for himself,

 **trusting that in time he would experience their risen Jesus.**

 They were a caring and safe place, a community of faithful

 among whom he could seek to find out about Jesus.

**The faith community trusted that the wisdom and grace of God**

 **would provide for Thomas to arrive where he needed to be.**

If someone is not quite where we are along **their** spiritual journey-

 we must be a safe and caring place, a supportive encouraging place,

 **and we must offer compassion and patient listening hearts**

 **for a Thomas to seek the Lord and explore their faith…**

… trusting that the Lord will by grace,

 accomplish the growth, nurture and development of their faith,

 all according to God’s will and purpose, God’s plan for them.

3rd, let us each, with courage and hope, confidence and trust,

 grapple with hard questions that maybe don't have easy answers,

 since that is how our faith deepens and grows more authentic…

… for if our proclamation is going to be relevant to our culture,

 then surely we must each have the experience and confidence

 of addressing our own questions and doubt with integrity,

 so we can respond to the questions our world is asking.

And today, as we live out our faith

 amid this present situation and uncertainty of the Corona-virus,

 **whatever God is up to and accomplishing through this**

 **don’t you want to be in on it and serve faithfully?**

 **So the question to ask during our present situation is this,**

 **how do I usefully cooperate with God toward making a difference,**

 **and that most helps strengthen and deepen my walk with my Lord?**

Perhaps, as we read in Jude 1:20-22

 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;  keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.  And have mercy on some who are wavering.