

SHOWN A PATH

Order of Service (bulletin)

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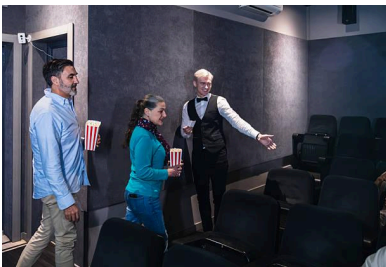
April 12, 2026
Easter 2

Psalm 16:1-11

Oh God, keep me safe - you are my refuge! I said to [Adonai], “You are my God; there is nothing good for me apart from you.” The holy people of my land are wonderful! My greatest pleasure is to be with them. But those who rush after other gods will bring many troubles upon themselves. I will not take part in their sacrifices; I won't even speak the names of their gods. You, [Adonai] are all that I have, you are my food and drink. My life is safe in your hands. Within the boundaries you set for me there are nothing but pleasant places! What a delightful inheritance I have! I praise [Adonai], who guides me; even at night my heart teaches me. I'm always aware of your presence; you are right by my side, and nothing can shake me. My heart is happy and my tongue sings for joy; I feel completely safe with you, because you won't abandon me to the Grave; you won't let your loved one see decay. You show me the path of Life; your presence fills me with joy, and by your side I find enduring pleasure.

John 20:19-31

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Temple authorities. Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Having said this, the saviour showed them the marks of crucifixion. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, “Peace be with you. As Abba God sent me, so I'm sending you.” After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained.” It happened that one of the Twelve, Thomas - nicknamed Didymus, or “Twin” - was absent when Jesus came. The other disciples kept telling him, “We've seen Jesus!” Thomas' answer was, “I'll never believe it without putting my finger in the nail marks and my hand into the spear wound.” On the eighth day, the disciples were once more in the room, and this time Thomas was with them. Despite the locked doors, Jesus came and stood before them, saying, “Peace be with you.” Then, to Thomas, Jesus said, “Take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Don't persist in your unbelief, but believe!” Thomas said in response “My Saviour and my God!” Jesus then said, “You've become a believer because you saw me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus performed many other signs as well - signs not recorded here - in the presence of the disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Only Begotten, so that by believing you may have life in Jesus' name.



Now, Thomas already had a nickname of sorts. In the Aramaic, which would have been the language that Thomas and Jesus and the others spoke to each other, his name was likely pronounced t'om'a. And Toma in Aramaic literally means twin. So twin is not really Thomas's nickname. It's his name. His name is twin. Now for the Greek speaking readers of the Gospel of John, the author says that the name in Greek is Didymus so that they would understand that Thomas's name also means twin.

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But fairly early on in the history of biblical interpretation, people started calling Thomas by something else. Thomas is *the doubter*. And that name stuck. People are more familiar, I am sure even those who may not have much experience in terms of the Bible themselves, with the phrase doubting Thomas than Thomas Dydimus.

I was actually talking to someone this week and they were asking about my work as a minister and I was trying to explain to them how church services go in the United Church. I kind of got the sense that they were familiar more with a kind of a free church style of church. And so I explained a little bit about how we do church on Sundays. I talked about the pattern of our order of service that we follow what is sometimes known as a hymn sandwich style where you have a hymn then you have something else and you have a hymn and something as opposed to churches that kind of have all their music in kind of a clump. They might even call that their worship time. And then, you know, they might have one clump in the service or maybe they have two clumps. In fact, this person kind of said, "So, when do you do your worship? Is it at the start or in the middle or at the end?" And I said, "Well, actually, in our tradition, we consider the whole thing worship, not just the songs." I also talked about how I plan each Sunday often by starting with a scripture reading that I don't necessarily pick. And I talked about the whole idea of using a lectionary and how that fits in with the pattern that Jesus would have been familiar with in the synagogues. And I noted that because this Sunday coming up (today) is the Sunday right after Easter, the lectionary is suggesting that we carry on with the Easter story that we read last week, which was the beginning of chapter 20 in John where Mary goes to the tomb, sees the gardener, realizes the gardener is Jesus, and goes back and tells everyone that she's seen Jesus. The very next story is what we read today. And I said, "This Sunday, we're going to focus on Doubting Thomas." Because I was pretty sure she would know about Doubting Thomas.

Now, today's reading didn't use the phrase Doubting Thomas. Doesn't have the word doubt in it, but people who are familiar with this story probably (like me) call it the Doubting Thomas story. That nickname just stuck. Even culturally it has become a general description for a skeptic. Oh, you're a Doubting Thomas. Might have nothing to do with the story.

Thomas is the one who said, *I won't believe unless I can see and touch for myself*. And it's very unfair to refer to this particular disciple as the doubter as if it's a unique characteristic of this disciple Thomas. Peter and John, they didn't come to believe Mary that the stone was moved away, that the body was gone. They had to run and see for themselves an empty tomb filled with only grave clothes. And they believed the body was gone, but they didn't necessarily believe in resurrection. Mary sees angels and she simply says to them, "The fact that the body is gone. *They've taken away my rabbi, my teacher's body, and I don't know where the body is*. She still only believes in an empty tomb, what she can see. And then she encounters the gardener. *Did you move the body? I'll take it away. I'll take it*. She knew that they had borrowed this tomb. And maybe the gardener had noticed that and said that body does not belong in that tomb and they took it away. That's exactly what Mary thinks is going on. And so she sees the person she believes to be responsible for moving Jesus' body and says, "Just tell me where the body is and I'll go get it." That's the extent of her belief. And then... she hears her name called and the voice is familiar. Her ears expand what she believes. That's Jesus' voice. And she wipes the tears away from her eyes and her eyes see that this is the Jesus that she knew. And she calls him Rabbi, my teacher. And Jesus says, "Go tell the others." And she does. She says, "I have seen the Lord. I have seen our rabbi, our teacher." And she tells them all that happened after John and Peter left the empty tomb.

And as we read the Gospel of John, we're not 100% sure how the disciples reacted because the Gospel author doesn't tell us what their reaction was. So, we don't know if they believed Mary simply based on her confidence

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and her account, the words she spoke about what she said she experienced. In other gospels, there's a little more explanation. Next week we're going to read from Luke chapter 24. And in that one, the disciples openly admit that the women came and told them that they'd seen angels, but we thought it was an idol tale. They didn't believe them on their word alone. And John does say that a week later, these disciples were still afraid of being arrested like Jesus had been and they were huddling behind the locked doors. So even if they believed what Mary had said, it didn't instill any confidence in them that they were any safer than they were before, that anything had changed in their circumstances. And then... any doubts disappear when Jesus appears mysteriously behind the locked doors that evening, the same day that Mary came and told them what she'd seen in the morning. And Jesus shows them his crucifixion wounds and he says, "Peace be with you" and he says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And he says, "You have all the authority you need to forgive the sins of others." So hearing is unclear, but seeing was believing.

And as we heard, Thomas wasn't there. And so when the other disciples (presumably later that evening or the next day) repeat for themselves to Thomas what Mary had said to them in the morning that *we have seen the Lord*, Thomas says, "That's not good enough for me. I don't believe it just because you tell me. I didn't believe it when Mary told me." And for Thomas, the bar is going to be even higher. "Actually seeing and hearing Jesus isn't going to be enough for me. I need to touch him. I need to physically examine that those are real wounds." And as we heard, Thomas got his chance a week later. And even though John's gospel notes on Easter morning when Mary thought she was talking to a gardener and realized it was Jesus, Jesus told her, "Don't touch me." And he made this cryptic statement saying, "I haven't returned yet to my father or my God, my Abba." The text doesn't explain what that means, but Jesus says, "Don't touch me. You can't do that." But here, Thomas is invited to touch Jesus. So something has changed. Whether it was something Jesus did that now allowed Jesus to be touched or whether Jesus realized that something more was needed for Thomas. So Jesus invites him to inspect the wounds.

And then we get to the moral of the story. ***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*** And the verb there is in Greek can be a little tricky. I think in the translation we read today just said *those who have believed*, but it actually is: *have come*. It's not like not completely past tense but it implies they've taken time to believe. It took it's not just seeing but they've established belief over time. And then the author takes over and says, "I wrote these words here so that I can help you, the readers or those being read the story: I can help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the only begotten, and in believing you may have life in Jesus." All of the Thomas account leads to these morals of the story.

A surface reading of the Doubting Thomas story might be that the message is... *well just believe*. You know, believe without any convincing evidence of any kind. Just believe just because someone said so. I don't think it's quite that simple. I don't think the surface meaning of this gospel passage is quite that simple.

It kind of reminds me of a song from the musical The Book of Mormon where Elder Price had a crisis of faith when all of his attempts to baptize people in this new land for him had gone awry. And so he reminds himself that he just needs to believe. And he starts out with some pretty standard language that a lot of people in Christian circles might be able to believe. He sings, "I believe that the Lord God created the universe." Oh, lots of people kind of can know that one. And then maybe a little more specific corner of Christianity. "I believe that he sent his only son to die for my sins." And then the third line, "I believe that ancient Jews built boats and sailed to America." He goes on, "I believe that God has a plan for all of us. I believe that plan involves me getting my own planet. Dang it. Just believe." Now, we can ignore the parts of Elder Price's belief that might seem a little silly because they maybe are more of those fundamental literalistic unique parts of Elder Price's tradition that might be different from ours or other corners of the Jesus' families of faith. But we have to admit

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that blind faith, just believing, is not an easy thing to do.

The more reasonable reality is that faith (by definition) never comes with indisputable evidence. Faith by definition can't be completely proven. But people (I think maybe most people) still rely on something they see as authoritative to arrive at their faith. Even if this full unequivocal proof is going to be absent, that there's something between *just believe* and *I've come to believe*.

We remember all of Jesus' close followers were skeptics. All of them. And yet they were still worthy enough in Jesus' mind to be blessed with words of peace, to be endowed with a spiritual call to look past the sins of others. You know, for Mary and Peter and the others, hearing wasn't quite enough, it seems. But when they followed that up with seeing, and in Thomas's case, touching, they were convinced. But after those first days and weeks around that first Easter, seeing and touching the risen Jesus was no longer going to be available as a convincing experience for others. And so what else can be available to ease our skepticism?

Now for me, believing in Jesus post Easter doesn't necessarily rely on the truth of a physical resurrection. I remember when I was a theological student at seminary, we all were invited to write a reflection paper on whether faith was possible if Jesus never physically rose from the dead. I think the paper started with the hypothetical, what if there was unequivocal proof that Jesus never actually physically resurrected, could you still believe? And people in my class went a whole bunch of different ways. I think I probably tried to steer a middle ground like I do and that's probably why I got a good, you know, equivalent of a B minus or a C, something like that. I think it was the same year we did that paper (first year) that a Baptist friend of mine from Edmonton came to visit me in Vancouver. This was my first spring there. And so when Easter rolled around, we went to find a Baptist church that we could go to, he and I, and a couple other my theological companions. I remember that Easter message was that Jesus rise from the dead as proof of Jesus' divinity for others. That Jesus didn't rise for any other purpose than to prove that Jesus was God's child. That Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. Now, if that truly was the purpose of resurrection, then Jesus would have been wise to just keep showing up, right? Keep doing it. If that's why we do it, then keep doing it. But the Bible makes it clear that this didn't happen.

Jesus' resurrection experiences were time limited and people limited. Hearing about resurrection was all that was left after a certain short period of time. And that wasn't enough for even some of those disciples who walked and talked with Jesus during his lifetime. So how could it possibly be enough for those who would follow, including many of us simply hearing?

We need to find some authority that we can rely on. Now, for some, the Bible itself is a spiritually holy infused document that has its own authority in and of itself. If the Bible says it, then that's good enough for some. *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*

Others might need a little bit more. One fact about the Bible's composition helps me. The oldest New Testament writings we have, the ones that are closest to the time of Jesus, don't come until 20 years after Jesus' lifetime. The Gospels, it takes another 40 or more years. And some of the New Testament, it's 60 or more, maybe even as much as a hundred years after Jesus' time. So even with those earliest letters of the Apostle Paul, (First Thessalonians thought to be right around year 50) in those 20 plus years, there were a lucky few resurrection witnesses who could have their proclamations either be embraced or come up short for those that they told their story to. But the message in those missing 20 years of our narrative found a new generation. And then it found another new generation and another new generation until there were no live witnesses left who could say, "I saw Jesus resurrected after being crucified." And eventually there was nobody

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left who said I heard this from Peter who said he saw it. So it's at least a three-level experience and over time it becomes more and more. For me there is a measure of authority attached to the commitment that comes with their persistence in those 20 years. Can we say that Jesus physically resurrected and was seen by Mary and who thought it was a gardener? Maybe, maybe not. But we can be pretty sure that 20 years later there were people who believed that and they believed it in spite of opposition from within their own tradition. Opposition from within the empire and especially in places like Rome under Emperor Nero and others.

Last week while I was sort of channeling the centurion from Cesaria, Cornelius, who had been told by Peter that Peter was now convinced that God didn't show any partialities that God didn't play favorites. In that story, both Cornelius and Peter found inspiration that led to their meeting in dreams. I'm not opposed to the power and authority of inspiration. And I think that inspiration does come to us sometimes consciously, sometimes less consciously. Dreams are where we imagine beyond what we might be able to prove. And if we interpret that inspiration in a way that motivates us, that something just feels true to us, then that can be a source of authority that leads to faith.

I'm very fond of those moments where we might sense a holy companion in our midst, that so-called third man experience where there's something just outside my view, but I feel like I'm not alone. You'll sometimes be aided by being in what the Celts would call that *thin place*: that place where spiritual connection comes easier. Sometimes it's a natural environment, literally a mountaintop experience or listening to music or being in the company of others and hearing something that inspires something that makes that connection between us and the spiritual a little less elusive.

I also want to say that except for Mary, all of the convincing encounters in just the Gospel of John's story are group activities. Mary is the only one who has a singular activity in the Gospel John. And that's unique to John's gospel because all of the other gospels have a group of women who go and discover the empty tomb, not just Mary of Magdala. But even in John, Mary goes and gets others. She goes and gets Peter and this other disciple to share the empty tomb experience even if they don't stick around long enough to meet the gardener. It's group connections around this experience of resurrection.

Believing I think has authority when it's shared and experienced in supportive community. It's not a coincidence that we call ourselves a *community of faith*, a community that we intentionally accept as diverse and complex and even full of every possible level of belief that could exist. Faith can grow when we're among others who might be struggling as well with growing our faith. Remember that language in John that's kind of implied in the Greek that those who *have come to believe* and in the book of Acts the phrase is even more open-ended: *those who are coming to believe*. They're in the process of believing.

Our reading today tells of Jesus giving the disciples the Holy Spirit. In the First Corinthians letter the apostle Paul lists off a number of gifts of the spirit and saying these gifts are different but they all come from the same spirit and they all serve this good of all and he lists off the the a certain number of gifts and it's not I don't think it's necessarily expected to be an exhaustive list but here's a bunch of gifts that Paul reminded the Corinthians about. He said some are gifted with *wisdom*, some with *knowledge*, some *work miracles*, some *prophecy*, some *discern different spirits*, some *speak different languages*, some *interpret different languages* and some are gifted with *faith*.

Maybe Paul was saying that being able to just really believe is a gift and it's a gift that not everyone possesses because we have many gifts existing within the community and not everyone is gifted with that, *I just believe* faith. For the rest of us, faith, like it implies in John and in Acts, is a process, a path that we're journeying down.

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Here's the really good news that I hear in today's reading. Jesus' disciples were not known for their unwavering faith. They were skeptics. They were deeply unsure. They made a ton of mistakes. Actually, the last part of the Gospel of John, if we had read past the Thomas story, we would hear that Peter when he goes back to Capernaum kind of decides, *I'm kind of done with this ministry stuff. I'm going back to my old job. I'm going fishing.* And then the risen Christ makes one more appearance and invites Peter to feed the lambs and the sheep.

Despite these disciples not being known for their unwavering faith, they were still blessed with the peace that Jesus brought. They were still gifted with that call to not judge but to forgive. I believe that this shows us a path for our calling as well.

Let's pray.

Thank you God for the guidance that comes to us in scripture through those moments of uncertain inspiration. We are grateful, God, that you are a light to our path. Amen.

#100TLUS My Lighthouse

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