

What just happened here?

2nd Easter Year A
April 2017

Our grandson Declan, who is just finishing his first year of college, says that Thomas Sunday is his favorite Sunday of the year. It is the Sunday when he is most comfortable in church, because doubting is openly acknowledged and acceptable.

I tell him that doubt is a friend of faith, that doubt leads you to explore your heart and to draw closer to your faith. To me, complacency and certainty are the more likely enemies of faith – complacency doesn't bother to explore, and certainty tends to assert itself as 'being right' and others wrong. The difference between *I wonder*, and *I know and stop thinking*.

What draws us to religion and what pushes us away? Why are some people God focused, and others not? Why was the news of the Resurrection real to some people, and to others, 'fake news'?

In the April 2017 *Scientific American*, Michael Shermer wrote in his column *Skeptic*, that between historical truths (what we know happened, i.e., Jesus was crucified) and religious truths (our theology of why Jesus was crucified) there is a grey area of Jesus' Resurrection,

"which is not impossible but would be a miracle if it were true.

Shermer explains,

...Because miracles are far less probable than ordinary historical occurrences, such as volcanic eruptions, the evidence necessary to justify beliefs about them must be many times better than that which would justify our beliefs in run-of-the-mill historical events.

...The principle of proportionality means we should prefer the more probable explanation over less probable ones...The principle of proportionality demands extraordinary evidence for extraordinary claims."

Evidence that justifies beliefs. Hmmn.

In his Easter Sunday homily, Deacon Eric asserted that the sure evidence of the resurrection on which the disciples relied was the discarded grave clothes – discarded because, having conquered death, Jesus had no further need of them. There was other circumstantial evidence: the stone inexplicably rolled away, the empty tomb. And, the resurrection appearances began immediately. Jesus appeared outside the tomb to Mary (when she mistook him for the gardener). In today's Gospel reading, John recounts two appearances of the resurrected Christ to the disciples. Still, all this was 'evidence' capable of other interpretations at the time, and many more explanations have been offered over the last two thousand years.

A few years ago, I was sitting at a meeting with several others, there was tension in the matters being discussed. One of the participants rose suddenly and left the room. “I can’t do this anymore”, she said. The discussion leader turned to me and said, “Tell me, please, what just happened here?”

That question, “*What just happened here?*” likely dominated the discussions and thoughts of the disciples who were gathered fearfully behind locked doors. According to John’s Gospel, by the evening of that first Easter day, they had heard Peter’s account of the empty tomb, and Mary’s proclamation, “*I have seen the Lord.*” And they hid.

On the evening of that very same day, Jesus came to them and said, “*Peace be with you.*” His words evoked the memory of the Last Supper, when Jesus said, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*” John 14:27.

Faith is a mystery of the heart. We have an irrational tendency to want to solve the mystery – to pick at the edges looking for evidence, so that what we would call a leap of faith is not across such a broad chasm. What happens when we are willing to let go of the tangible to embrace the spiritual? To let go of what we ‘know’ and embrace a greater truth?

Shermer’s skepticism – his principle of proportionality – is couched in such wonderful language. The resurrection, he says, is ‘not impossible, but would be a miracle if it were true.’ Indeed. Precisely and Alleluia!

Beliefs and evidence collide; imaginations are sometimes not big enough to embrace the possibilities; the ‘evidence’ is reshaped. Still, in a very few generations after that first Easter, the resurrection faith became the majority. It was an unstoppable trend, overcoming skepticism and spreading throughout the known world.

To offer some perspective, here are some modern day ‘unstoppable trends’ that took hold despite skepticism of the highest order (taken from a collection in an e-publication entitled ‘Total Wealth Weekender’). In 1943, Thomas Watson, then chairman of IBM, said he thought there was “a world market for maybe five computers.” Ron Wayne, the little-known co-founder of Apple, lost faith in the just-birthed company after only two weeks and sold his 10% share of Apple for \$800. Then there’s Steve Ballmer, the former CEO of Microsoft, who made fun of the iPhone and laughed it off, thinking it would be a flop. You can find that on Youtube. Do you remember Stuart Sutcliffe and Pete Best? Both men played with a little band you may have heard of but left before they hit the big time...the Beatles.

Unstoppable trends. In his book *Surprised by Hope*, theologian NT Wright wrote about the unstoppable resurrection faith quite simply: something must have happened, he says, for all those people to accept and to follow, to transform their behavior *on this side* of death. What were they hearing that obviously made such a difference in their lives? NT Wright points to the quality of community life – what happens when people come together to live the way of Christ.

That is the resurrection, and the ‘evidence’ of the resurrection, then, here, and now. Come together to live the way of Christ. Embrace it with your imagination and your heart.

A whole people not just following an individual path, but feeling their way together toward a greater dimension of life. A Resurrection people. An Easter people.

Throughout this seven week Easter season, our Sunday scripture readings are about how the disciples made sense of ‘what just happened here.’ The scriptures tell the story of how Jesus of Nazareth became known as the Christ, how they understood that the Jesus who was physically with the community of disciples before the crucifixion is the same Jesus who is with the community post-Easter.

Thomas is an important figure in this story, and we do him a disservice when we mock him as ‘doubting’ Thomas. Thomas is the apostle for every one of us. When the others are reluctant to follow Jesus to Bethany because of the danger, Thomas says, ‘let us go that we may die with him.’ He is the disciple who makes the most profound declaration of faith, when he falls to his knees and proclaims, *My Lord and my God*. John 20:28

What Thomas doubts is the testimony of the other disciples. I would assume that after Judas’s betrayal, the eleven looked askance at each other, as they asked, ‘what just happened here?’ Is there another betrayer among us? They were fearful of the authorities, and – with good reason – also fearful of one another.

Today’s reading from Acts is Peter’s sermon to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost – it is the foundation proclamation of our Christian faith. On the Day of Pentecost - the fiftieth Day after the Passover – the disciples were all together; Matthias had been chosen to replace the traitor Judas. Peter brings the language of the Torah and psalms to bear on their understanding of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In doing so, Peter raises the theological paradox of God’s foreknowledge and human freedom. Standing with the other eleven disciples, speaking for all of them, Peter concludes his Pentecost sermon simply, “*this Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.*” Acts 2:32.

What, indeed, did just happen here?

The resurrected Jesus is not impatient with skepticism. Jesus cared enough to give Thomas what he needed – and Thomas needed to see for himself. Jesus meets people where they are – at the tomb, in the locked room.

Jesus meets *us* where we are. Is the resurrection outside your experience? Go as far as you can, and God will meet you there. Even if you have forgotten how to believe. We may not recognize Jesus when he comes to find us – Thomas did not! Mary did not, she thought he was the gardener. We will not always know him, particularly when we suffer hardships and doubt.

We come to the Lord's table to touch and taste for ourselves.

Yes, our minds want evidence. Our hearts, though, our hearts require assurance, not evidence.

My peace I leave with you. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid.

Words to *live* by.

Amen. Alleluia!

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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