Second Sunday of Easter; April 24, 2022, Year C

Acts 5.27-32; Psalm 150; Revelation 1.4-8; John 20.19-31

By Pastor Renee Splichal Larson

Grace and peace to you from the One who has conquered death: Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen.

A number of years ago I heard rumblings of the doubts of a world icon: Mother Theresa. She is a woman I have greatly admired. I have even wondered what it might take to give up everything and care for the poorest of the poor, who lay in the gutters of streets dying, like the women in Mother Theresa’s order, The Sisters of Charity.

Mother Theresa has been perceived to have an incredible connection with God, which fostered her, what seemed to be, unwavering faith. Only someone with a direct line to God could endure such poverty and witness such suffering and death without throwing in the towel…Or so the world thought.

After Mother Theresa died in 1997, her confessors, for good or for ill, revealed to the world how much doubt and darkness she experienced for much of her life. According to an article in Time Magazine: When Mother Theresa was 36 years-old in 1946, she heard the voice of God:

“He called her to abandon teaching and work instead in ‘the slums’ of the city, dealing directly with ‘the poorest of the poor’ — the sick, the dying, beggars and street children. "Come, Come, carry Me into the holes of the poor," Jesus told her. "Come be My light."[[1]](#footnote-1)

It was the last she heard the voice of God until she died. In 1979 she wrote to the Rev. Michael Van Der Peet: *Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

No one could have guessed or known the inner turmoil and dark nights of the soul Mother Theresa experienced throughout her life. She, as a beacon of faith, struggled as much as any other, yet she loved God and neighbor with her whole heart. Despite the silence and emptiness she felt, she stayed faithful to God’s mission for her in caring for the destitute and dying.

People who are perceived to have any doubt, especially when it comes to faith, are often scrutinized. Doubt can even become part of how one is identified, particularly when it comes to Jesus’ disciple, Thomas. We hardly even know Thomas as merely, Thomas.

Why don’t we know Thomas as “confessing Thomas,” as he utters one of the most profound confessions of faith in Scripture when he says to Jesus: “My Lord and my God (John 20.28).”

But no, we know Thomas predominantly as “Doubting Thomas.”

Thomas needs something more to convince himself that what his friends were telling him was true: That Jesus, who was crucified and buried, is now very much alive. Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Christ, yet mistakes him for the gardener. She does not believe he is living even when he is standing right in front of her. Until Jesus speaks her name out loud, “Mary…” she does not believe. Mary then runs to tell the disciples that Jesus is raised from the dead.

Peter and the beloved disciple hurry to the tomb and find it empty, with the grave clothes lying there as Mary had said. The beloved disciple only needs to see the empty tomb and he believes, but Peter does not.

No one believes Mary at her word; they all doubt, and need something more.

Our Gospel reading today begins with fear and a locked room. The risen Christ, right in the midst of their fear and doubt, appears among them and says, “Peace be with you.”

The disciples now believe that Jesus lives, but there is one who is not present: Thomas. They tell Thomas with conviction, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas basically says to them, “I need proof…“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.”

It is so hard to believe sometimes that death is conquered, isn’t it? That God is real and present in this world; that God is with you and with those who suffer? It can be hard to truly believe that you are forgiven, that you need not do anything to receive the love of God, that you already have it; that it’s yours. It can be hard to believe that in the end, everything will be all right because God has a plan for the fullness of time to redeem all of creation.

We are invited by the crucified and risen Christ to believe in Him and his love, not only when our lives are fine and good, but even more so when we are afraid like the disciples were afraid, when we are grieving when someone we love has died, when we are feeling hopeless, or angry, or abandoned. We are invited by the crucified and risen Christ to believe in Him and his love even when we doubt and wonder whether or not the whole story is true.

When Jesus appears to Thomas with the rest of the disciples gathered round, he shows him that it is really him, scars laid bare for all to see. Jesus first offers Thomas peace. He offers up his crucified and raised body to unbelieving Thomas so that he may believe.

Jesus says to him, “Do not doubt but believe.” Perhaps a more accurate translation is: “Do not be in unbelief, but belief.”

I might be making assumptions here, but my guess is that every last one of us has had or has doubts. None of us can prove that the resurrection actually happened and that is not the point, nor is it what God asks of us. If we could prove it, we wouldn’t need faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11).

Just because the disciples and Thomas didn’t believe at first, doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t rise from the dead. Jesus was resurrected, and death had been conquered, whether they believed it or not.

All the stories we read and hear about Jesus, the entire Gospel of John, is written in order 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.”

On this second Sunday of Easter, according to the Gospel of John, it’s also Pentecost…this is when the Spirit of God is given to those who are sent out. Verse 22 says, “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.”

The word for “breathed” is the same word that is used in Gen chapter 2 verse 7, and Ezekiel 37 verse 9, when God breathes in the nostrils of the first human the breath of life, and when Ezekiel prophesies to the breath to enter into the multitude standing on their feet waiting to come to life by the breath of God. The Holy Spirit brings life and animates that which is dead or paralyzed with fear to have courage and conviction.

The disciples are not to simply witness Jesus’ resurrection and call it good. They are to embody him and his life of service and trust in God. When Jesus asks Thomas and the rest of the disciples to believe, he is not implying some sort of head knowledge. Belief in Jesus means seeking life in Him and not in other things. Belief in Jesus means understanding that his mission of forgiving sins and offering peace is also your mission in a hurting world. Belief in Jesus is trusting God even when you have doubts.

To have doubt and still turn to God is exactly what faith is. What made Mother Theresa an incredible person of faith is that even in her deepest doubts and despair she still turned to God for life, for strength, and for love, as well as her questions. People who have experienced the depth of darkness have the fertile ground in their hearts to have true resurrection and life. The message of the cross is that Jesus comes to you and to me in our darkest moments and offers you peace and the Holy Spirit of God.

Jesus pronounces a blessing on the ones who haven’t seen and yet believe. This is us, along with the other estimated 2 billion Christians in the world today that have not seen, yet believe because the witnesses to the resurrection came out from hiding and did what Jesus asked of them.

This same witness inspired people like Mother Theresa, even though she did not see the risen Christ with her own eyes either. Faith comes through hearing the story and being nurtured in faith communities all across our synod and world. It is a journey that has ebbs and flows.

Fred Craddock, a contemporary pastor and author, writes this about faith:

There is faith based on signs and faith that needs none; there is faith weak and faith strong, faith shallow and faith deep, faith growing and faith retreating …

For some, faith is born and grows as quietly as a child sleeping on grandmother’s lap. For others, faith is a lifetime of wrestling with the angel. Some cannot remember when they did not believe, while others cannot remember anything else, their lives having been shattered and reshaped by…faith.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We live in a world in which many things are uncertain, except Christ’s love for you. We are met this Sunday morning, one week after the celebration of Easter, hearing the confession of one who was deep in unbelief: “My Lord and my God!”

May we all confess today with Thomas, in all our doubts to the One who is life: “My Lord and my God!”

1. (*Mother Theresa’s Crisis of Faith,* by David Van Biema. Time Magazine - https://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *John*, by Fred Craddock, p. 142, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)