

2nd Sunday of Easter
April 8, 2018
John 20:19-31
The Rev. Carenda Baker

There is a lovely broadcast on National Public Radio on Sunday mornings called “On Being”. The host, Krista Tippett, interviews all sorts of people about their life’s experience and how it has shaped and helped them find meaning in life. She mines their experience to glean what they have learned about growing in compassion, faith, goodness, hope, and greater understanding between people. She likes to begin each interview by asking her guests about their early years, and what role spirituality played in their personal development.

I’d like to play Krista Tippett this morning, and ask each of you as part of today’s “Trinity podcast” this question: If you have come to believe in the good news of Jesus, the risen Christ, how did it happen for you?

The awesome thing about this question is that there is no right or wrong answer to it, so there is no need to be anxious or intimidated by it. We will each have our own story. Coming to believe happens for each of us differently. For some, coming to believe was a process that began early, sitting through years of Sunday school lessons and weeks of summer vacation Bible school. For others, believing has come through the influence of a relationship with another person – a parent or grandparent, a friend or teacher or mentor. For still others, believing began and has deepened over time through worship in a faith community, gathering regularly to hear the Scriptures and participate in the liturgy and Sacraments of baptism and Holy Eucharist. Some folks are born deep thinkers, with keen and searching intellect. For them study, reading, and debate have been important on their path to believing. Some come to believe through their own personal experience, perhaps through a deep prayer life and serving others. And yet others come to believe through the gift of some tangible evidence, some “proof”, a bit of grace that intrudes into their life, maybe a miracle like a pregnancy and birth that wasn’t supposed to be possible according to the medical experts, or healing from a disease, injury, or addiction. And there may be someone here today who has not yet come to believe in the good news of the risen Christ, or aren’t sure what they believe. Wherever you are, it’s okay.

Up until the 1600’s, to “believe” meant to hold something dear, to prize, to give one’s loyalty to, give one’s heart to. By the time of the Enlightenment, to “believe” came to refer to the ability to prove the veracity of something, to show tangible evidence to support the truth of a proposition. To believe became a matter of calculated discovery,

made possible through objective observation of facts and development of clear cut rational formulas. Believing became a matter of the intellect, a rational offering of evidence that could be physically seen, touched, documented, tested and in some cases, replicated.

When it comes to matters of faith, believing is a much messier enterprise. In matters of faith, believing involves not only the mind and tangible evidence received through our five senses. In matters of faith, believing involves the whole person – body, heart, and spirit, as well as mind. This is what believing meant to the gospel writer John. For John, to believe is to have an intimate relationship with God through coming to know and follow and love the person of Jesus.

That first Easter day and into the evening, Jesus' followers came to believe when they experience for themselves his risen presence face to face. Think about it. The disciples did not at first believe Mary Magdalene when she came back and told them she had met the risen Lord in the garden outside the empty tomb. They are gathered together that evening in a room with the doors closed and locked. There was the whole mixture of feelings – fear, confusion, and disbelief. And then Jesus appears, and there is now also joy, triumph, and astonished belief - because they can see and hear him right in front of them. He is in their presence once again. He bids them peace, and then shows them his hands and side. This image is very powerful. He shows the disciples his wounds, as if to say, "I know what you saw. Believe what you're seeing now. It's really me."

For whatever reason, Thomas isn't with the rest of the disciples when Jesus appears to them on Easter evening. Maybe Thomas is a doer, an active and restless man who has to keep moving in order to walk off his anxiety rather than keep it bottled up inside, or worse yet, sit and rehash in endless conversation the events of the last few days. Or maybe Thomas was an introvert and needed quiet time alone to regroup and try to process what had happened. Or maybe Thomas actually went out alone looking for Jesus, since Mary had reported that morning meeting the resurrected Lord in the garden. For whatever reason, Thomas was alone.

When Thomas returns to the place where the rest of the disciples have been hunkered down, he discovers that he has missed the resurrection reunion. It is unfortunate that through the centuries Thomas has been given a rather derogatory nickname which seems to have stuck: "Doubting Thomas". Thomas has been criticized, seen as less than faithful for his "doubting", his refusal to accept what the others tell him they have seen.

But this is an inaccurate and too simplistic a label. Thomas doesn't doubt who Jesus is. Thomas is devastated by what has happened. He is being honest, authentic, and courageous enough to say, "I need more". I want to see and hear what you all have seen and heard. But I'm sorry friends, I just can't take your word for it this time. I need to see and touch Jesus for myself." Thomas is struggling with believing the outcome could be any different than the horrible ending he has already experienced. Are his friends' imaginations running wild? In their grief, have they been caught up in fantasy and wishful thinking? Part of him does want to believe what they're saying.

I wonder what that first Easter week was like for Thomas and the other disciples. Does Thomas's yearning to see Jesus again grow more intense each day? Does he resent the other disciples who are ecstatic and so excited that all they can talk about is seeing Jesus alive? Does Thomas want to pick up and go back to his old life again because he is lost, in mourning, and doesn't know what else to do?

It is a whole week later and the disciples are gathered together in a room with the door closed and Jesus appears again. This time Thomas is with them. Jesus' words of greeting are, as before, "Peace be with you." Then Jesus turns to Thomas and tells him to put his finger in the marks in his hands, invites Thomas to reach out his own hand to touch the deep wound in Jesus' side.

It is a most tender and intimate encounter. Jesus has come seeking Thomas, and meets him in the moment, right where he is. Jesus provides what Thomas has been yearning for, a real living experience with the risen Lord. Jesus seeks Thomas out in order to offer him what he needs. Jesus doesn't scold or criticize Thomas. Jesus draws Thomas closer to help him move to a deeper level of believing. The word "doubt" does not appear in the Greek text. What Jesus says to Thomas is, "Do not be unbelieving, but believe. "

Whether we call it doubt, skepticism, realism, or plain old just wanting to see proof, these are not signs of unbelief. They are part of the human journey and the struggle to live by faith. The Baptist minister The Rev. Dr. William Self said: "Doubt is like a front porch. All of us go through it before we get into the house of faith."

Today is the 8th day after our Easter Sunday celebration of the resurrection. It's a good day to take our doubts by the hand, and walk across the porch with them. We can expect to see the risen Christ standing at the door to meet and welcome us. He waits patiently to walk with us and build with us a deeply abiding, strong, and maturing house of faith. He has come to offer us whatever it is that we need today: strength, forgiveness, hope, courage, comfort, wisdom, peace, healing, joy. And best of all, his

very Real Presence at the table. Can you see him? His arms are held out to each of us, his scars still plainly visible. He says, "Peace be with you. Welcome home, friend. Do not be unbelieving, but believe."

You will find a 3x5 note card in your bulletin. I invite you to take a few minutes to think about and write down either one thing about the Christian faith you don't understand, or one thing you wonder about or struggle with in living as a person of faith, or some doubt that you have. Write your concern or question or doubt on the card and place it in the offering plate when it is passed. Know that God is pleased by these small offerings of ourselves as we seek healing and experiencing growth in love. And know too, that God will bless and use us, at whatever level of faith we find ourselves.