

**In Praise of Thomas:
A Conversation with Ken Kovacs & Dorothy Boulton**

A Reflection on John 20:19 – 31

Second Sunday of Easter/ April 19, 2020

We are taking a different approach to today's Scripture. We're framing it as a conversation --- for all of us to participate in. Dorothy will begin with the first part of the text, John 20:19-23 and we'll have some reflection and conversation, and then Ken will continue from verse 24 – 31. We'll also pose some questions for you to reflect on, or discuss, or journal about at your leisure.

Prayer for Illumination

Guiding God, send your Holy Spirit upon the reading of your Word that it may serve to show us the path of life and lead us into your presence where there is fullness of joy. Amen.

Scripture Reading: John 20: 19 -23

Reflection (Dorothy Boulton):

Like many scripture readings in this time of pandemic, I'm resonating with the text in a totally new way. As never before, I am identifying with those disciples who are shut in together in that locked room.

Because of COVID-19, I know that many of us are huddling in place. We are sheltering because we are facing circumstances that we cannot control --outside forces that threaten our very lives.

We are, like those disciples, living in a world turned upside down. The plans they'd made, the future they thought they'd be living into have all been changed. I think a good word for it is trauma. They have experienced a trauma --- a rupture, a dramatic shift--- and are experiencing the after effects. First, they're reeling from the violent death of Jesus at the hands of the state which has crushed their dreams and their expectations. They are fearful that the authorities are seeking them out. Their lives are endangered as well.

And that's how they started the day!

Now, on this Easter evening, while they are still trying to process that event and its consequences, they are trying to understand and reconcile the news brought

by Mary – and the other disciples -- that Christ has, in fact, risen. Or at least that the tomb has been found empty.

How do they --- how do we --- deal with this kind of unimagined situation?

I see myself in them...waiting, anxious... wondering how long their lives might be threatened. And then hearing this news about Jesus... maybe they're not even daring to hope. How do you envision something that radically new? Can it be true that God may have new possibilities for them... that God may still be saving God's people... that the words of Scripture are reliable and true: that nothing is impossible with our God. As they continue to wonder...what comes next? They're beginning to recognize that this just could be something they have never seen before.

I'm understanding in a new way what it is to live in this tension....between fear and hope.

Question to Dorothy: What does give you hope in this story? What does that hope look like to *you*, now?

It's that image of nothing keeping Jesus away.
The doors are locked, but Jesus finds a way in.
You had mentioned, Ken, in one of our Bible studies that in the Gospel of John, Jesus has this interesting way of coming along side of people, appearing from an unexpected angle.

And now, more than ever, I appreciate that.
That Christ appears...even when he is unlooked for.
That Jesus will come even when we're all cooking in a pot of emotional stew.
Amid our fear and anxiety, Jesus comes. Nonjudgmentally.
When he appears to the disciples, he doesn't say anything negative or unkind.
He just becomes present.

Jesus says one of the most compassionate things:
Peace be with you.

"Hello. I am here." As we learned in sign language during the children's message: Become quiet with you.

I was listening to NPR's Midday on Monday, April 14th, and the host Tom Hall was speaking with his guest Dr. George Everly, Jr. (whose father was a member of this congregation, by the way.) Dr. Everly was talking about Psychological

First Aid in a Pandemic, and in some ways, this scene with Jesus and the disciples is the way he describes it.

The most toxic aspect of the human psyche, he said, is worry. And this gift of being a calm, non-anxious presence, that speaks with compassion in the midst of that anxiety, serves to support and to stabilize. It offers something that can help people feel more in control of their lives.

I think of that when I see Jesus coming among those disciples and saying: "I'm here with you. Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says to them "I am with you". As you'd also said, that for John, that's the Pentecost moment.

Dr. Everly pointed out that psychological trauma is the hidden pandemic. That it will affect 10, 50, 100 times as many people as the virus itself. We are living in this time of incredible chaos. We are witnesses to very real pain and suffering. And as we lament, and grieve, and search for hope and meaning, my prayer is that we will know the gift of that compassionate presence... in one another, in the caring work of mental health professionals, in the rebuilding of a hopefully more just society... in the loving and eternal Spirit of Christ.

So, I'm ready to turn to you, Ken, to spend some time that other disciple, the one who "wasn't in the room where it happened." In the words of the Hamilton lyrics, there's someone we must meet: Thomas, Thomas. Tell us about him and his encounter with the Christ.

Scripture Reading: John 20:24-31

Reflection (Ken Kovacs): What strikes me about these verses is that it's in two sections. In verses 24-25, the disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." But he doubts their testimony. He wants to see for himself. He wants to see and to touch. He wants evidence.

Then, "eight days later," John tells (verses 26-29), Jesus appears. This seems significant, as the number eight is often associated with new beginnings, both within Judaism and the Christian tradition. You know how much I love the number eight—but I digress. Jesus returns. This time Thomas wasn't out of the room, he wasn't out shopping or whatever; he was with the disciples. Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Jesus is there to see Thomas. "Put your finger here, place your hand there."

Now, Thomas is often known as Doubting Thomas. Verse 27 is often translated: "Do not doubt but believe." Unfortunately, that's not the best translation of the

text. It's saying nothing about "doubt." This might be better, "Do not be unfaithful, but have faith."

Doubt vs. belief: this is how we often frame or hear this story. And it's unfortunate. People too often assume, both within the church and outside it, that there's no room for doubt in the life of faith. Either-or: doubt or belief. And it could sound as if Jesus is judging or rebuking Thomas for doubting and therefore, because we often moralize our hearing of scripture then assume that the point of the text is that we should not be like Thomas, that there's no place for doubt in the church. But that's missing the point. As you said, Dorothy, Jesus doesn't appear with judgment.

As you know, I'm often uncomfortable with either-or thinking. I have an allergic reaction to dualistic or either-or thinking when it's come to most things. An either-or approach is often reductive, simplistic, and doesn't allow for or speak to the complexity of human experience.

When we look at John 20 as a whole, we have Mary Magdalene, Peter, the Beloved Disciples, Thomas, and the rest of the disciples, we discover that there are many ways to approach resurrection: seeing, not-seeing, believing, not-believing, doubting, wrestling with the true. Thomas had his own way. And we need to honor that.

Question to Ken: When we have Communion here at Catonsville Presbyterian Church, when you invite people to come and gather at Christ's table, you use the words, "Come in your faith and come in your doubt?" Why do you say that? What do you mean by that?

I learned a long time ago that doubt can lead into the arms of God as much as belief. By doubt, though, I don't mean being a skeptic or being suspicious. There are people who are skeptical about everything and everyone, suspicious about everything and everyone. That's often a kind of psychological defense against encountering the truth. That's not what I mean by doubt. I mean being curious, having questions, wondering about something, being curious, intellectually honest, emotionally wrestling with the truth. It's passionate and personal. It's bringing all of yourself into the question. Kierkegaard said, "Truth is subjectivity." You bring all of your subjectivity to bear in your pursuit of the truth.

My mentor James Loder at Princeton Seminary wrote beautifully about this in what could be called an Ode to Thomas. When Thomas heard the news from the other disciples, he could have just walked away. If he really didn't want to get

caught up in this story, he could have said nothing to their claim. Instead, Loder says, "he made a big, tactical mistake." He stepped into the problem, he stepped into the story. He could have said, "That's wonderful. Wow. Great news." He could have said, "I believe" and then walked away. This is what a lot of people do, by the way. It's what Jean-Paul Sartre called "bad faith." "Just say you believe in God, then you won't have to think about it anymore." That's faithless faith.¹

"No, in praise of Thomas," Loder wrote, "[Thomas] knew a problem when he saw it, and he had the courage to say so, and the tenacity not to let go of it until he had an answer."

Thomas cared enough to be curious. He was passionate about knowing the truth. His passion, his doubt, his questions, his curiosity helped to lead him to the Resurrected One. They helped to prepared him for Jesus's arrival when he appeared. Then Thomas was ready to receive the news about Jesus's resurrection. Then he says, "My Lord and my God."

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*We promised we would have some questions for you as well.
(And we're grateful to Jill Duffield, for posing these in her Presbyterian Outlook column)*

1. *How are you feeling on this second Sunday of Easter? Do you relate to the disciples afraid and huddled behind locked doors?*

And, slightly modifying Jill's question,

2. *Do you feel judged or rebuked whenever you ask questions, particularly questions related to faith or theology or the church or the Bible? Why?*



"Jesus Shows Himself to Thomas" by Rowan and Irene LeCompte, one of six mosaic murals by artists Rowan and Irene LeCompte in the Resurrection Chapel at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Made available by the "Art in the Christian Tradition" from the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

¹ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 214. For more on Loder, see Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).