

Easter 2C - April 28, 2019

Witnessing to the Risen Christ - Rev. Seth D Jones

Scripture: Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Easter season lasts 6 weeks, until Pentecost, and so during that time, we will explore these early days and years following Jesus' resurrection. It is really the formation of what we call 'church' now. How this singular experience in history formed into what we experience as church today is a strange story, but then, we have already agreed that a resurrection is a strange event.

It is important for us to understand that Christian faith is founded, first and foremost, not on ideas, but on the direct experience of God's love in this world. The ideas of Christianity and all the scholarship and theology and interpretations begin with this direct experience of the very present Risen Christ. And so, when we speak of '*bearing witness*', as the title of today's sermon states, we are speaking of tangible realities, experiences of the senses that press our consciousness and awareness beyond what we think of as materially real into what many mystics have called 'the really real'. The introduction of John's first letter puts it this way:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life...we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 Jn 1:1-2)

To put it another way, our direct, sensing experience of the Risen Christ is a gateway to the deeper spiritual realities that are the pattern and structure of all things.

It is this direct experience that Thomas demands in our Gospel reading today. Direct experience is connected directly to belief. Thomas says to the disciples, who have just had their direct experience with the Risen Lord,

Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. (John 20:25)

But let's back up for a moment. I said direct experience is connected directly to belief, but I just used the word 'belief' as if we all know what that means. What Thomas means here by belief, or faith, may not be what we mean by belief.

We have some problems in the modern world when it comes to belief. There is the modern sense that there are no absolutes, and to claim absolute belief is therefore delusional at best. But this is because we think of belief as ‘*assent claims*’, claims we make about particular tenets or creeds. For instance, it may be that a church requires certain belief in the Nicene Creed, or the absolute faith that the King James Bible is the one true expression of God’s word. This is what I mean by ‘*assent claims*’.

But belief back in Jesus’ day was always associated with two things - direct experience and life. To believe was to have life, and the only way to believe was to have a direct experience, a continual feedback loop, where direct experience creates belief and life becomes possible when we seek this direct experience. This radically changes how we understand belief. Now, rather than belief being a functional statement about something we believe ‘in’, belief is now a thing we strive to *do*. In other words, believing moves from being a noun to a verb. I seek to believe God and Christ, rather than believing *in* God and Christ. This is how to understand what Thomas is getting at in our Gospel story today.

Thomas is kind of the intellectual touchstone in Gospels. He is the one who demands direct experience in order to understand. Thomas is also the one who calls out vagueness in Jesus’ pronouncements. Back in John 14, Jesus makes one of his more confusing statements when he says:

I am going to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also know where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas looks around the room at the other disciples, then back at Jesus. He sees Jesus is getting ready to keep talking, because Jesus talks a whole lot in the Gospel of John, so he jumps in:

Yeah. I don’t know what that means. How can we know the way if we don’t know where you are going? We don’t know where you are going. A place with rooms and houses? Are you going to become a steward at an inn and make beds for us? Are you talking weird about your death? We don’t know what you are talking about here, Jesus.

Or to put this interchange another way, Thomas is seeking to *believe Jesus*, not *believe in what Jesus is saying*. There is a difference and it is the difference between knowing a thing and experiencing a thing. Thomas seeks the experience. Thomas knows what St. Augustine and St. Anselm understood, that ‘*faith always seeks understanding*’. Understanding in order to believe leads to the problem we are trying to deconstruct here - that belief in the modern world is assent to claims made. Belief, however, by way of direct experience, seeks to understand the world relative to what I have now

experienced. Faith, or belief seeking understanding, means faith and belief are verbs not nouns, not tenets, to be assented to.

But let's be real here. The resurrection experience creates problems and conflicts. If you have all kinds of internal conflicts about the resurrection story, you are supposed to. The experience of the Risen Christ is specifically designed to force a confrontation within the depths of your being between the reinforced, consensus, defined reality of your earthly life and the expansive, continually unfolding, mysterious depths of the deeper reality of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants your world to get weird, and reality, our understanding of the faith and the world in which our faith interacts, looks very, very different when seen from that perspective. This is what Jesus means, in part, when he tells Nicodemus, *The truth shall set you free*. You will be freed from seeing the world from within the boundaries of what you think you know, from what you have tacitly and directly agreed to, the definitions of things from an earthly perspective.

That internal conflict and confrontation between consensus reality and the deep reality of God and Christ is what is going on in Acts 5. Peter and the rest of the disciples are arrested and jailed by the Sanhedrin for preaching heresy in the streets. They were, of course, sharing their experience of Jesus' resurrection. They are told to quit teaching in the name of Jesus, then are released from jail, and they go out and keep preaching. In Jesus' name. And so the disciples are brought before the Sanhedrin again.

The high priest says, "You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

*Peter says to the high priest, "We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead - whom you (the religious authorities) killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. **We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.**" (Acts 5:28-32)*

Notice that Peter appeals to the disciples' direct experience as witness to the Risen Christ and thus why they do what they do. Belief as an action that is continually expanded by sharing that belief, that faith, in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. True life, for the disciples, and thus for us, is in the act of belief seeking God and Christ, not believing **in God and Christ**.

I speak of this direct experience of the Risen Christ as an individual process, that each of us must engage this desire for direct experience, of continually seeking to believe Jesus and God, and this is very true - it is an individual process, but the channel flows in both directions, from many people to the one and from one to the many.

The first resurrection experience is Mary Magdalene's garden experience with Jesus. Jesus shows his risen self to Mary, the one, and she takes the message to the many, the disciples. They demand what Thomas demands - the direct experience. Then the disciples, the many, have that direct experience with Jesus and bring that experience to the one, Thomas, who also demands the same direct experience.

We are deep into the mysterious and mystical here. Assent statements and absolute claims break down rapidly in the face of the mysterious and mystical, not because there aren't absolutes and not because there is no value in assenting to claims and statements, but because in this reality of the Risen Lord, words fail, statements are always incomplete, knowing is always expanding and deepening. The future stretches out before us, now not in terms of time but in the spatial movement of the eternal.

How do we bear witness to this continually expanding, deepening reality in a way that makes sense? Well, we can do what the disciples do, and demand the direct experience - not once, or twice, but always. And then we testify to the direct experience.

Here is how Frederick Buechner puts it:

Prepositions can be very eloquent. A man is "in" architecture or a woman is "in" teaching, we say, meaning that is what they do weekdays and how they make enough money to enjoy themselves the rest of the time. But if we say they are "into" these things, that is another story. "Into" means something more like total immersion. They live and breathe what they do. They take it home with them nights. They can't get enough of it. To be "into" books means that just the sight of a signed first edition of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland sets your heart pounding. To be "in" books means selling them at B. Dalton's.

Along similar lines, New Testament Greek speaks of believing "into" rather than believing "in." In English we can perhaps convey the distinction best by using either "in" or no preposition at all.

Believing in God is an intellectual position. It need have no more effect on your life than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams or the theory that Sir Francis Bacon wrote Romeo and Juliet.

Believing God is something else again. It is less a position than a journey, less a realization than a relationship. It doesn't leave you cold like believing the world is round. It stirs your blood like believing the world is a miracle. It affects who you are and what you do with your life like believing your house is on fire or somebody loves you.

We believe in God when for one reason or another we choose to do so. We believe God when somehow we run into God in a way that by and large leaves us no choice to do otherwise.

When Jesus says that whoever believes "into" him shall never die, he does not mean that to be willing to sign your name to the Nicene Creed guarantees eternal life. Eternal life is not the result of believing in. It is the experience of believing.¹

With the experience of believing, we must accept that there is a continual ebb and flow of what we call faith and belief in our Christian lives.

I 'lost' my faith sometime around 28 years old. My loss of faith was a fading out rather than some intellectual conflict in my mind and soul. At some point, I just understood that all the things I thought and did were not within the context of anything resembling Christian thought anymore. Like a little boat that loses its mooring in a harbor and floats out into the open sea, I just accepted this and rode the waves of the vast currents of spiritual thought that run about out there.

Unlike my loss of faith, my return to believing Jesus and God (as opposed to believing in Jesus and God) was sudden, mystical and powerful. It happened over the course of minutes in our apartment on an afternoon in the middle of the week. I didn't believe, and then I did. Along with that belief was the presence of Jesus. The material reality expanded into a vast spiritual reality that was 'really real'. That sense of presence lasted for months and months.

As one of my favorite punk bands used to say, *You ask a lot of questions for a young man*, my belief and faith did not end my questions. But what did happen is that my questions became much better questions. My faith sought understanding. My belief sought to believe Jesus and God, not to believe in Jesus and God. I demanded direct experience and God answered my demanding prayer.

The benefit of this experience over time is that, now, when I do not believe or have faith - which actually does happen even though I get up here every Sunday (and if you say it does not happen to you, I say, You are not being true to your personal experience) - I know a very valuable truth that I share with Peter. That truth is this:

God waits. 2 Peter 3:9 says,

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

If I simply am patient myself, God will be patient with me. I remember that the Lord returned to me; I did not return to the Lord.

¹ originally published in [Whistling in the Dark](#) and later in [Beyond Words](#). found at <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/12/8/believing>. Accessed 4/26/2019

I remember that I have sat with Jesus, like the Gerasene Demoniac, who, when healed by Jesus, sat at Jesus' feet, clothed, and in his right mind.

Be like Thomas. Be like the disciples. Demand the direct experience of the Risen Christ in your life. Not just once but often. Wait on the Lord, because I can assure you the Lord has waited longer for you. Then, when you have that direct experience of the Risen Christ, when you *bear witness to these things with the Holy Spirit*, I pray all of you will testify with the disciples that Christ is risen, Christ is risen, indeed!

Amen.