

Overcoming Doubt

John 20:19-31

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! It's the week after Easter, and that's always a bit of a letdown. Easter is one of the biggest Sundays of the year for most churches, and so anything would be a letdown. But after not being able to gather together at all last year, people are looking for connection, craving community, wanting to be with others.

The time around Easter is also when news stories about religion pick up for a bit. There are the usual stories about how different groups are trying to prove or disprove the resurrection. This year included stories of churches hosting vaccine distribution sites, finding creative ways to come together with the pandemic restrictions, or churches who ignored the restrictions altogether. The biggest story this year was a Gallup poll that showed that church membership in the United States fell below fifty percent for the first time. With 70% of people saying they were a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque in 2000, that's a 20 percent drop in twenty years. About half of the drop can be attributed to changes in religious preferences, the other half can be attributed to people still believing, but not formally joining a church. Even around here, there are people who attend frequently but may not be officially members due to paperwork problems.

The drop in formal membership in groups of any kind has been happening for decades, too. It's been a couple of decades since sociologist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, about the disruption of community groups, how people aren't joining groups or organizations anymore. That trend doesn't seem to be ending anytime soon. Add in the ways that the institutional church has dealt with sexual abuse or financial scandals, plus political polarization being reflected in churches and it's no surprise church membership is declining.

Our Gospel lesson is famous for being the story of "doubting Thomas," but the main reason we remember Thomas and his doubts is because he's not with the group that first Easter evening. We forget the rest of the disciples aren't much better. They were hiding in the locked room, trying to make sense of what the women had told them about the empty tomb, and what Peter and John had seen when they went there, until Jesus shows up. They didn't seem to truly believe Jesus had risen from the dead until they had seen Him in the flesh.

Thomas, though, doesn't get to see that first appearance. So when he was told of Jesus' appearance to the other disciples, Thomas answered defiantly, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe".

There's debate over why he wasn't with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Some think that it was because Thomas was no longer "with" the disciples, no longer a part of the group, no longer a follower of Jesus. He was off on his own, alone, dealing with the grief and fear he had by himself. And being alone like that was dangerous.

The health effects of loneliness are well known, and have been raised as one of the main costs of many of the pandemic restrictions used this last year. Even before the pandemic, we knew that loneliness, or social isolation, has a huge impact. It raises the risk of premature death by up to 50%, ranking near smoking and alcohol use. It increases risks of dementia and mobility loss.

Being alone has a spiritual cost, too. The devil is described as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. And if you've ever watched a nature documentary, you know that predators

like to pick off those who are alone, those who are away from the herd, those who are not protected by the group. The same thing happens spiritually.

That's part of the danger that comes from the drop in church membership and church attendance. People who are alone are easily led astray. They can look for any other group to join, whether it's a good group or not. They can put their faith too much in a politician or government or science or conspiracy theories.

Thomas was alone that first Easter, and so he missed out on Jesus, and he doubted. But that wasn't the end of the story. Whatever his reason was for not being with the other disciples that first evening, Thomas is with the other disciples the next week. And that's important. Even though he doubts, he is willing to give his friends the benefit of the doubt and show up and see what happens.

Eight days later, they are still in the same locked room, waiting for Jesus to come to them. Jesus had overcome sin and death, but the same powers that be that sentenced him to death were still the powers that be that threatened the disciples. And so they hid behind locked doors, still afraid. This time Thomas is with them, waiting to see what will happen, waiting to see if he can believe again.

Jesus didn't leave Thomas in his doubts. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples again and said to them, "Peace be with you," calming their fears. More than that, then Jesus turned to Thomas with outstretched arms and said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but *believe*."

Martin Luther believes this is the lesson of the Thomas episode. "We may learn how Christ loves us, and how amiably, fatherly, gently, and mildly he deals with us and would deal with us.... He does not desire to overturn or reject the weak in faith, but bears patiently with their

weakness, not snarling at them frightfully, but handling them gently and respectfully."

Thomas sees the risen Jesus for himself. But it's not just the seeing that lets him believe. It's the words of Jesus that let him believe. It's the years he spent following Jesus. It's the testimony of the other disciples and the women who prepared him for this moment. And it is being with the other disciples, other believers, that helps him believe again.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote "The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid." An open mind does no good if it only stays open, moved from one thing to another. The point of opening your mind is to find a firm foundation. The point of an open mind is to shut it on something solid.

We all have trouble believing sometimes. We all have friends or family or neighbors who have trouble believing. We can't argue them into believing – we can only help clear away the obstacles that are keeping them from believing. We can't scold them into believing – we can only encourage them to continue to search for knowledge, and pray for them. We shouldn't leave them alone in their doubts, but should walk alongside them and guide them on their journey of discovery.

Sin conspires to keep us separate, keep us lonely, and keep us isolated. But Jesus defeated sin, and his work brings us together. He brought his disciples back together after they'd scattered during Holy Week. The Holy Spirit continues to bring us together to encourage one another, support one another, help one another overcome doubts. Being with others helped Thomas overcome his doubts. It can help you, too.

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