

“A Week Later”
John 20:1-31
First Presbyterian Church

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Is Jesus dead, or is he alive? Last week, on Easter Sunday, I suggested that’s the central question of the Christian faith: is Jesus dead, or alive? If he is dead, then we can remember his words, and follow his teachings, and model our own lives on his, which are no small things. But if he is alive — if he is really alive — then he is free to do what every living person does: appear in our lives, in ways that we do not control. If Jesus lives, I submitted last week, then he is free to visit us, just as he came to his first disciples — not on the Sabbath, but on the day after; not in the sanctuary, but at the tomb, and into the ordinariness of their daily lives.

Today’s Scripture lessons magnify that understanding — because in John’s gospel, Jesus doesn’t appear just once on Easter, but he keeps showing up — appearing to his disciples on their terms, and on their turf — doing whatever it takes for his followers to come to faith, in whatever sense their faith may come. Listen to the gospel lesson as it continues in chapter 20, beginning with verse 19.

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For the “beloved disciple,” the time is right away, and the empty tomb is the right place and “blind faith” — belief alone — is enough. But for the rest of the disciples, the vast majority of the disciples, it will take more.

So later Easter morning, Jesus appears specifically to Mary, in the garden, where she is in grief so engulfing she can’t even see life when it comes right at her; her faith is blind indeed, and it is only when she hears his voice that her heart opens.

And later on that Easter evening, Jesus comes to his disciples, who are cowering behind locked doors, huddled together against the night and against their terror, not believing what a woman says about their risen Lord. They have to see for themselves.

And later still, a week later, on a Sunday after Easter, on a day just like today, Jesus is still reaching out to his friends, this time for Thomas. Thomas, who is doubting, yes, but also honest, gutsy, skeptical, unwilling to pretend. He has to touch the risen Lord, to feel with his own hands the hands of Jesus, whom he loved.

And Jesus honors them all. He doesn't require them to come to him; he doesn't specify the terms or conditions; he doesn't require them to have faith or repent or believe or be good before he shows up. He doesn't require that everyone comes to faith at the same time or in the same way.

The respected New Testament scholar Fred Craddock notes the vast *spectrum* of faith allowed for in John's gospel:

The beloved disciple alone has that ideal faith which needs no proof; Mary Magdalene believes in response to a word, the disciples see and believe, ... Thomas [says he] must touch in order to trust. ... Faith is not for all the same experience, neither is it generated for all with the same kind and degree of "evidence."

And so it is with us, Craddock says:

For some [of us], faith is born and grows up 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 the decision of faith.

Given these varieties of faith experiences, for us and for the first disciples, it's clear that no one way is normative for everyone. "What [the gospel] does insist on," Craddock says, "is that ... faith is not limited to that circle of original disciples. ... In fact, Christ pronounces a blessing upon all who have not seen and yet who believe. ... Faith is available to all persons in all places [no matter their] distance [in] time or place from the time and place of Jesus of Nazareth."¹ Faith is available to all persons ... across time, and across place, and across vast differences of ways of coming to believe.

We don't talk about the mechanics of faith very much, the nuts and bolts of how faith comes, and when and why it happens. But the truth is that for some of us, faith comes easily, or at least clearly, with a certainty so absolute that, once it is seen, it can't be unseen. I think of many of us who have grown up in the church, grown up believing, so that we can't imagine *not* believing. It's part of our existence, like the air we breathe. For others, the certainty comes all at once, as it did to a friend of mine who coasted through college, did his share of "drugs-lite" at the club-scene, came to grips with his homosexuality, and then, out of the blue one day, in his apartment alone, reading, in a moment of truth, the love of Jesus came washing over him like a healing balm. Jesus comes to some of us that way, as he does to the beloved disciple in John's gospel, with an utter certainty of faith, and nothing else that happens to us can ever take it away.

For others, we see "as in a mirror, dimly" — like Mary Magdalene, through the shadows of our grief, or the fog of our day-to-day worries — until something startles us out of our reverie and we realize that the light has come into the world again. I think of my own experience many years ago, in the grief after my late miscarriage, when, after months of prayer and counseling, and trudging through work and taking care of my family, one day when I went to pick up Annie from childcare, I saw the sun shining, as if I hadn't seen it in years, and the green of the trees against the brilliant blue sky, and I smelled the fresh pine and heard the birds singing, as if I wakened from a deep and restful sleep. Jesus comes to some of us that way, or perhaps more often, returns us to faith that way, returns us to life that way, whispering us to waken to the life that's been right in front of us all along.

For still others — we are, well, mystified, like the disciples in the upper room, confused, and not sure what to think, or perhaps even closer to Thomas, actively fighting against faith, willfully disbelieving until shown otherwise. I think of Kathleen Norris, who was well into her late thirties when she came to faith, returning to that process of discovery that got stalled in the vague Sunday School inklings of her childhood. "Faith is still a surprise to me," she says, "as I lived without it for so long." Yet she too doesn't experience the presence of the risen

Lord coming to her out of nowhere — instead, it’s like noticing a friend who has been there all along. She says,

Now I believe that [my faith] was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. And I have become better at trusting that it is there, even when I can’t feel it, or when God seems absent from the world. No small part of my [own] religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a “thing” that you either have or you don’t. Faith is not discussed as an abstraction in the gospels. ...And faith is not presented as a sure thing. ...²

Norris personally recoils against what she calls the “relentlessly cheerful and positive language about faith” she hears because it fails to take this biblical ambiguity seriously. Instead, she’s drawn to “novelist Doris Betts’ assertion that ‘faith is not synonymous with certainty... [but] is the decision to keep your eyes open.’”

“Faith is not synonymous with certainty ... but is the decision to keep your eyes open.” Your eyes, your ears, your fingertips, whatever senses draw you to the mystery of him. Because sooner or later, a week later, a lifetime later, he will come to us all, inviting us to see, to listen, to touch, to believe. Sooner or later we will come to our senses, and realize he’s been there all along.

In a well-worn passage in my copy of the book *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner invites us simply to sit up and notice:

The crow of a rooster. Two carpenters talking at their work in another room. The tick-tock of a clock on the wall. The rumble of your own stomach. Each sound can be thought of as meaning something, if it is meaning you want. ... What each of them might be thought to mean separately is less important than what they all mean together. At the very least they mean this: mean *listen*. Listen. Your life is happening. You are happening. ... The music of your life is subtle and elusive and like no other — not a song with words but a song without words, a singing, clattering music to gladden the heart or turn the heart

to stone, to haunt you perhaps with echoes of a vaster, farther music of which it is part.

The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak — even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves “Be not afraid,” [he says], “for lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him.³

O taste and see that the Lord is good, the Psalmist says — happy are we who find refuge in him. Taste, and see, and listen closely, for the Lord is good, and he is nearer than our own breath. For some among us, faith comes easily, it's true — a gift, like an ear for music or an eye for great design. For some it comes as a birthright, a way of experiencing life that we are born into, that we are raised with. For others of us, faith does not come easily, or early. Still, the risen Lord keeps coming to us, on our own turf, and on our own terms, doing whatever it takes for his followers to come to faith, however long it takes, and in whatever senses faith may come. The risen Lord keeps coming to us ... as if he has been with us all along. Amen.

1 Fred B. Craddock, *John: Knox Preaching Guide* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 142-143; quoted by Robert Dunham, in a sermon at University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC, April 7, 2002.

2 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) 169; quoted by Robert Dunham, in a sermon at University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC, April 7, 2002.

3 Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 77-79.