

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 24, 2022

Trusting Jesus

John 20:19-31

One woman tells about how she was explaining the story of Jesus' resurrection to her children as the family drove to church on Easter Sunday. "This is the day we celebrate Jesus' coming back to life," she said. Right away, her three-year-old son piped up from the back seat, "Will He be in church today?"¹

Actually, after last Sunday's service I received reports that at the beginning of our service, when I entered the sanctuary, one of our congregation's children spotted me and said, "There's Jesus!" So yes, Jesus was in church with us last Sunday, but it wasn't me.

Today, Jesus is once again in church with us. As we see in today's text, Jesus just keeps showing up in the gathering of his followers. Of course not all the followers who were here last Sunday are here today. That's one of the reasons why, in some parts of the Christian faith, this first Sunday after Easter is called "Low Sunday." The expression highlights the contrast between the great and glorious celebration of Easter Day and the more toned down period that follows. There's usually not the same buzz in the church sanctuary. Attendance drops. Offerings may decline some. Decorations start getting taken down. There's a sense of leaving the empty tomb behind and returning to the more mundane, ordinary, and unspectacular patterns and struggles of the everyday, especially within the life of the church.

A blog at the Acton Institute once collected some interesting facts about Easter. For one thing, if patterns held, more Americans searched for "church" on Google during the week leading up to Easter than any other week in the year. Secondly, the major television networks, which also pay attention to these patterns, run more overtly Christian programming during the primetime slot on Easter Sunday. And thirdly, Easter spending will be huge. Americans spend more on candy for Easter than for Halloween. A few years ago, the average American celebrating Easter spent \$28.11 on candy.² I'm guessing that figure has probably increased, especially with recent inflation trends.

But keep in mind that some of the best savings on candy happens after Easter. I confirmed that during a trip to the Bryans Road Food Lion earlier this week. If you shop there, you may remember that just around the corner, as soon as you walk in the door, are some of the discount shelves. They had plenty of Easter baskets and stuffed bunnies left. But the candy selection looked pretty skimpy this year. All the Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs had been purchased.

For those first followers of Jesus, there was no venturing out to the local stores during the days following Easter. This was no time to be seen in public. Instead, they were hunkered down in fear that what had happened to Jesus might happen to them as well. The doors were locked. The security cameras were on. Some of the disciples had even been through usher training on how to spot a potential threat. The goal was simply to hold on and hold out until the risk level dropped.

But the risen Lord has a mission to fulfill, and work for the disciples to do. In his resurrected body, Jesus doesn't need a key fob. He just comes and goes as he pleases, walls or no walls. On Easter evening, he appears among his followers and repeats a greeting that he had used countless times before. But now, it took on greater depth. "Peace be with you." Then he showed them the wounds that made possible their wholeness, and the wholeness of the world. He gave them a commission to spread that peace, forgiveness, and wholeness, not by their own power but by the power of the Spirit that he breathed upon them.

Now you might think that would be enough to send them out the doors and into the streets with the good news of Easter. But there was still plenty of fear to overcome, and plenty of darkness to dispel in that seemingly secure space where they were hiding out. Through the presence and work of Jesus, faith was starting to take shape. But there was still more believing that needed to happen. This transition from fear to faith is reflected in the experience of Thomas, whose encounter with Jesus is the focus of the second section of today's text.

Thomas is often viewed as the patron saint of doubters. "Doubting Thomas." He has never been able to shake that label. It's actually an injustice, because there's much more to Thomas than just this one moment of skepticism. For instance, earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is sick in Bethany. When Jesus tells his disciples to join him in returning to that region, they protest. Are you crazy, Jesus? People already tried to stone you there. Why return to a place where they want to kill you? But Thomas speaks up. "Let us also go," he says, "that we may die with him" (11:16). As one writer has put it, "These are hardly the words of a chronic doubter."³

That's not to say that Thomas's faith is full and complete. He's a hardheaded realist who's not afraid to voice his skepticism, or to ask difficult questions when things are confusing or unclear to him. Recall that when Jesus was teaching his disciples about his imminent death, Thomas is the one who asked, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus replies, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:5-7). It's not as if Jesus, frustrated with his disciples' lack of understanding, says, "Jeez Thomas, will you just stop it with the questions!" No, Jesus is open and receptive to the questions, and responds to them in a way that aims to shed light and generate faith.

A Gallup poll once pointed out that a large number of Americans avoid any association with a church because they are convinced that they will not find a congregation in which they can explore their religious doubts freely. More than half of the unchurched said that they could foresee becoming "a fairly active member" of a church, and a third of these potential members said that "they would be back in the Christian fellowship if they could find a pastor or church friends with whom they could easily and openly discuss their religious doubts."⁴

Note that when the risen Jesus appears to Thomas, he's not there to shut down the conversation, shame Thomas, and banish him from the fellowship. Jesus is there to make himself, especially his wounds, available to Thomas, in order to help him believe. True, Thomas should have been able to believe based on the disciples' proclamation of the resurrection, just as they should have been able to believe based on Mary's testimony to the resurrection. But hadn't Mary seen the Lord on Easter morning? And hadn't the other disciples gotten to see the Lord on Easter evening? In one respect, Thomas was only asking for a visible, tangible experience similar to what the others had received. And Jesus gives Thomas a palpable sign that leads Thomas to confess, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28).

Thomas's experience, along with the experience of Mary and the other followers of Jesus, shows us that Jesus loves us and cares for us. And one of the ways he does that is by coming to us and revealing himself to us in order to help us believe. In other words, the purpose of Jesus' presence among us is to call forth, create, and cultivate faith. John captures this in his own purpose statement at the end of today's text: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (vv. 30-31).

It's important to understand the nature of this "believing." In English translations, the Greek term is usually rendered as "faith" for the noun, or "believe" for the verb. But its range of meaning also includes the concept of "trust." When we use the verb "believe," it often has a primarily cognitive sense. That is, with your brain you either agree or disagree with something. You either assent or not that something is true. "Trust" is a more relational term. It encompasses the feelings that influence our thoughts and actions, such that "faith" is a matter of the heart as well as the head.

When John uses the verbal form, it probably has this strong sense of "trusting." So as one commentator has pointed out, we should re-read Jesus' words to Thomas this way: "Do not be *distrusting* but *trusting*." And, "Are you *trusting* because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to *trust*." And the purpose of John's Gospel: "These are written so that you may come to *trust* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through *trusting* you may have life in his name."⁵

Time passed, and those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus and his resurrection appearances began to die off. But the good news didn't die. Others, of another generation, would come to faith, would trust, not by seeing but by relying on second-hand testimony. Through the witness of the community of believers, the church, word spread about how the Word became flesh. The message about Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return was announced to future generations, including our own. We ourselves have the opportunity to be among those whom Jesus calls "blessed."

Today, the "blessed" have assembled again for worship. It's Sunday, the Lord's Day. It's our weekly anniversary of the resurrection. That doesn't mean we forget our Lord's suffering and death. The cross is always central to who Jesus is and who we are. But for us, this day of the week always commemorates how our Savior rose from the dead. So in one sense, today is Easter, again. Not that you've entered this sanctuary and joined a trip back in time, the type that I thought I may have been experiencing earlier this week when I drove by one place of business whose large electronic sign announced "Happy Valentine's Day!" I'm not sure what that was all about. But I am sure of what this service is all about. It's about Easter, one week later.

Not Easter with all the extra time or special preparation that went into last Sunday's services. One person tells about how, on Easter Sunday, the church's minister was trying to emphasize the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. He asked the children if they had noticed any changes in the music from previous weeks. "For the last few Sundays, the music has been slow and somber," he reminded them, "but today it's upbeat and joyful. Do you know why?" No one ventured an answer until the organist's three-year-old daughter said, "Because daddy's been practicing all week!"⁶ Easter Sunday calls forth some of our best energy and effort. Whether we're rehearsing the special music, preparing the sermon, arranging the sanctuary flowers, or setting up the fruit and pastries for breakfast, we want to make our annual celebration of the resurrection memorable and impactful.

And yet, the thing, or actually the one, who makes Easter Sunday most impactful is the risen Lord himself, present in the gathering of his people. What's true in our text is true here today. It's a week later, and when his disciples are assembled, Jesus shows up among them. He has promised to be with us, especially through the word, at his table, in our praying, and in our encounter with the poor and needy. In these ways, the risen Jesus gives us himself. He gives us himself in order to move you from distrusting to trusting. Jesus is here for you who need to come to faith for the first time. He's here for you who are already believing but need to continue in faith. Whether you're someone whose trusting needs to begin, or whose trusting has already begun but needs to be supported and strengthened, Jesus is here, for you, so that you "may trust that [he] is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by trusting you may life in his name" (v. 31).

¹ Peggy Key. Today's Christian Woman. "Heart to Heart."

² Joe Carter, "5 Facts about Easter in America." Acton Institute blog (March 24, 2016).

³ Mark Buchanan, "The Benefit of the Doubt," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (April 3, 2000) 63.

⁴ Martin B. Copenhaver, "Addressing the Doubter in Us All," *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April-June 1992) 20.

⁵ René Such Schreiner, Commentary on John 20:19-31. Working Preacher. April 24, 2022.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-2019-31-18> (April 19, 2022).

⁶ Lyn Hill. Christian Reader, "Kids of the Kingdom."