

**Easter II B  
April 8, 2018**

**The Rev. Julianne Buenting  
Gospel: John 20:19-31**

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says. I am not going to ask for a show of hands, but I do wonder how many others here have heard today’s Gospel story of “doubting Thomas” as a critique of Thomas? Because that is how I had relentlessly heard it- for decades!

Let’s look at this more closely. Jesus appears to his gathered disciples after the resurrection, and wishes peace upon them, and shows them his wounds. And he sends them “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Now, apparently Thomas did not receive the Google calendar notification, because he was not there with the disciples at that meeting. And so, despite their reports of the encounter, Thomas was dubious. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Those of us who are familiar with the scientific method, will be naturally sympathetic to Thomas’ concerns. We have passed through our entire education and often into our professional lives with the notion of what constitutes reality: an objective verifiable certainty, things we can touch, see, feel, and measure with our human senses, that can be experienced directly, described, measured and analyzed. In health care, we want our treatments to measure up to the gold standard of double-blinded randomized trials so we can feel certain about our treatment choices.

From that perspective, it is easy to find in Thomas’ desire for certainty an ancestor who was a kindred spirit to our ways of thinking. And to hear Jesus’ words about “those who have not seen and yet come to believe being blessed” as a criticism of Thomas. For that is exactly how it has been deployed in within Christianity throughout its history, and still today. The focus becomes on faith in a certain set of beliefs as the sine qua none of being a Christian.

So much of the enterprise of some branches of Christianity has used this story as a ball and chain to fashion the Way of Christ as a matter of belief rather than behavior. It’s the door-to-door preacher who asks if you have “received Jesus as your Lord and Savior” - as if that is the end of what’s necessary. As if the properly scripted profession of faith is the guaranteed ticket to heaven and that’s what “really” matters. If someone starts a conversation with you with the question, “if you die tonight, do you know whether you will go to heaven or hell” flashing red lights should go off in your head that you have encountered this sort of Christianity.

David Benner puts it more boldly: Unfortunately, Christianity has settled for dogma ... and tribal belonging, losing sight of the transformative way of faith. And that has come with a significant downside.

Franciscan friar Richard Rohr observes that

“For centuries, Christianity has been presented as a system of beliefs. That system of beliefs has supported a wide range of unintended consequences, from colonialism to environmental destruction, subordination of women to stigmatization of LGBT people, anti-Semitism to Islamophobia, clergy pedophilia to white privilege. What would it mean for Christians to

rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?”

I think this approach fits better with the actual story recounted in today’s Gospel. Jesus appears again when Thomas is present, Jesus beckons him to check out his wounds and to believe. The written words tell us nothing of the tone of Jesus’ voice, but given that he has just bid peace upon the whole gathering, I suspect that his tone was not critical, but more understanding, recognizing and accepting where Thomas was. It’s an approach that would bring Thomas more fully into the community that Jesus was sending to the world, as the Father had sent him.

And that sending was not about getting people to sign on to a set of doctrines, but to preach the transformation that comes from relationship with the Divine through Christ, and growing together into the community of love, care, equality and reconciliation that God dreams for us. Jesus’ “Peace be upon you” greeting becomes the foregrounded vision of the encounter and a vision that we can trust in for the future. I pray that this Eastertide will draw us even more deeply into that beloved community that includes and serves all in the name of the Risen Lord.