

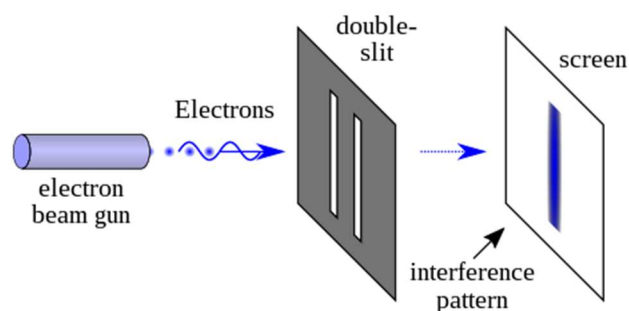
**Sermon: Second Sunday of Easter**  
**John 20:19-31 | The Rev. Roger Ferlo | April 16, 2023**

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I find it unusual to occupy a pulpit on the Sunday after Easter. As some of you may recall, I was a parish rector for many years. The Sunday after Easter is when rectors of parishes, no doubt exhausted by the exertions of Holy Week, assign someone else to preach, preferably a seminarian. So atoning for my past rectorial sins, and eager to present Cathering and Barnabas with an Easter weekend off, here I am. And now I need to figure out what to say about Doubting Thomas.

So let's talk quantum mechanics. I know almost nothing about quantum mechanics, except that if you going to talk about issues of doubt versus certainty, which is what this morning's gospel seems to about, well, why not talk about quantum physics, with apologies to any quantum physicists in the room?

I recently read an article describing the famous double-slit experiment, beloved among quantum scientists.



It seems that it's possible to set up a barrier made of material through which a stream of electrons shot from an electron gun is unable to pass. On one side of the barrier you place a fluorescent screen that can show the effect of an electron bombardment. On the other side you place the

electron gun. (I don't think the scientists actually call it an electron gun, but you get the picture.) In the impermeable barrier, there are two slits, one near the top and one near the bottom, either of which can be open or closed, like a portal. The experiment goes like this. You close one portal, say the one at the top, and then shoot a stream of electrons toward the screen. The stream finds its way to the open portal, and leaves its mark as a bell shaped curve on the top area of the fluorescent screen. Then close the top portal, and open the bottom one. Same thing happens—you will find evidence of the electrons hitting the bottom of the screen, again in a bell shaped curve. Seeing is believing. The evidence is clear; life goes on as before; all is right with the world.

But if you leave both slits open and then unleash the electron stream again, it gets interesting. You get not only bell curves of arrival on both the top and bottom of the screen, but also an interference pattern in the middle, where there was no slit at all. It's as if the all the electrons soared through both slits at once, not just half through one slit and half through the other, but all of them through both. The same thing happens if you send just one electron toward the screen with both ports open. It's as if a single electron can land in two places at once. If that's not weird enough, what's even weirder is that if you set an electron detector at each open slit, and again send just one electron through the device, then you either detect it passing through the lower slit, and find nothing at the upper one, or you detect it passing through the upper slit and find nothing at the lower one. I am already quite beyond my depth here, so I am quoting a recent description by David Z Albert, a philosophy professor who writes about science.

According to Albert, the implication of this famous experiment is that "it turns out that the business of merely *looking*, of merely producing a record of which of the two slits each particular electron goes through, somehow causes the pattern of landings to revert to the more sensible pair of bell shaped curves." It's as if your observation—your merely looking at what's happened—changes what happening.

As I say, I am a preacher, and not a scientist. But my puzzlement in the face of this quantum reality, a reality that feels to me like unreality, makes me sympathize with Thomas this morning. The way I have trouble believing that an electron can be in two places at once, unless I look at it, Thomas has trouble believing that a man he saw tortured and executed is still alive, and walks through doors. When it comes to matters of believing, especially on this Sunday *after* Easter, the Sunday where we need to get on with life as it is, I suspect we can all sympathize with Thomas. We all want business as usual in our lives, we all want certainty. But the message this morning's gospel is that the kind of certainty Thomas looks for, at least in matters of faith, is difficult if not impossible to come by, as difficult as it is for the scientist to come by a certain sense of where that electron is going to land.

Let's be clear. It's not doubt that troubles Thomas here, in spite of centuries of smug religious types who associate Thomas with doubt as if doubt were a bad thing. My God, if I've learned one thing in all these years of priesthood, in matters of faith doubt is appropriate. I sometimes think that I can measure the quality of a believer's faith by measuring the quality of a believer's doubt—to believe in spite of doubt seems to me a more noble course than believing just for the sake of believing, or believing just because everyone else believes. Doubt, after all, is not the opposite of faith. In matters of faith, let's be honest—doubt goes with

the territory. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. And it's certainty that Thomas seeks. That's why he won't accept what his friends are telling him unless he can touch Jesus's wounds, even thrust his whole hand into Jesus's open side.

One of my favorite images of this scene is by the seventeenth century painter Caravaggio, who depicts a sympathetic Jesus grasping Thomas's arm, and guiding his extended finger directly into the wound in Jesus's side, a wound that Caravaggio depicts with almost surgical precision.



The painting makes some people squeamish, so realistically Caravaggio has depicted the way Jesus makes Thomas so forcibly probe the open wound.

It's a powerful image of certainty. But I think that in the interest of realism—in the interest of certainty—Caravaggio has misread the passage. Listen to it again:

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Did you notice? Jesus invites Thomas to do exactly what Caravaggio portrays him as doing—"Put your finger here." "Thrust your hand into my side." But unlike Caravaggio, the gospel writer doesn't describe Thomas actually doing what Jesus invites him to do. Maybe it happened the way Caravaggio thought it did, but nothing in the text says so, and I have longed since learned to trust the text. Instead, Thomas lays all hope of certainty aside, and recognizes Jesus as the resurrected Savior that he is: "My Lord and my God."

This odd omission on the part of the gospel writer is like the yawning omission in the story of the resurrection we heard last week. The fact is that none of the gospel writers describes the resurrection itself. Their focus is not on the mechanics of resurrection, but on the aftermath of resurrection, the way Jesus continued presence changes the believer's lives forever.

Think about the events recounted in the Palm Sunday and Holy Week readings you may have heard in the past several days. These gospel stories of the passion and death of Jesus recount a sordid series of betrayals on the part of Jesus's closest followers: there was Judas at the last supper, planning Jesus's arrest; there were the disciples, including Thomas, fleeing the scene to save their own skins; there was Peter, warming his hands in the praetorium courtyard, denying three times that he ever knew him; and now in today's story here are ten of the eleven remaining disciples, gathered in this upper room with the doors locked shut, quivering in fear, a fear shot through with guilt at their own acts of cowardice.

When Jesus appears to them, walking through locked doors, I imagine that their first reaction was an even greater fear, a fear that he had returned to avenge their betrayal, to punish them for their cowardice. But instead of retribution, he offers them Shalom, which in Aramaic means Peace,

Wholeness, even Holiness—a Peace richly undeserved and therefore all the richer for it. It is the disciples' own moment of resurrection that we witness here as Jesus breathes his spirit of reconciliation upon them-- their liberation from the bondage of their own human sinfulness.

I think it's that kind of forgiveness that motivates Thomas' quest for certainty. It makes today's story all the more poignant, all the more pointed. We too are latecomers, just like Thomas. But what Thomas encounters is not a vindictive Jesus, but a Jesus who insists on reconciliation, a Jesus who insists on reconnection with the very friends who betrayed him or deserted him. It's not as if his resurrected body is healed of its wounds. The wounds remain all too present. But Jesus does not live in his woundedness, does not define himself by his woundedness, and neither should Thomas.

And neither should we. Let's be honest. We all have experienced our moments of betrayal—perhaps by friends, or by spouses, or by children, or perhaps just by life itself. We have all been betrayed in some way, and I have been around long enough to know that we all have in some way betrayed others, even if we have betrayed only ourselves. What this Gospel tells me, what Thomas tells me, is that only as we open ourselves to being forgiven can we accept ourselves for who we are, both sinners and redeemed, and accept Jesus for who he is: My Lord and My God. And then, Christians that we are, we can act upon the prayer that Jesus taught us, forgiving others as we have been forgiven, learning to share this resurrection love, this gospel of reconciliation, and to do so bravely, even prophetically, in a world where revenge and supermajority vindictiveness seem too often to rule the roost.

Spreading a gospel of reconciliation: consider that your resurrection challenge.

