

Sermon on John 20:19-31
Second Sunday of Easter, April 28, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Over the past 35 years of my ministry in the Church, I have taught a LOT of confirmation classes, and several hundred confirmation students. You know, the middle school aged young people from grade six through nine, growing into adolescence, of every hair and skin color or style, with diverse ethnic heritages and socio-economic backgrounds, communities and economic levels. They have been from rich families and poor, struggling families, privileged suburban kids and refugee children straight from the camps in Thailand, city kids and rural – I’ve seen and taught them all. But whatever their backgrounds, they all fall under certain categories of acceptance or resistance to hearing the “good news” of Christian teachings about Jesus, Lutheran catechism principles, or Biblical studies. The “categories” of receptiveness to the Christian gospel range from those youth who: *believe without questioning, those who just want to get through the class and get confirmed without a hassle, those who listen but want you to prove it, those who challenge what you say, those who aren’t really listening or paying attention (because there is a cute boy or girl in class, or their god is sports and their traveling team, and those who reject it totally.* If you are a teacher, you have met all these kinds of students! The smallest number are those who *believe without questioning, and those who reject it totally* – the extremes! We have been socially conditioned to avoid those extremes of blind acceptance and total rejection – at least in American culture! We have been programmed to at least create the illusion of thinking for ourselves, even when we are following the crowd! “Make the church great again (like it used to be)” or “I’m an atheist, just leave me alone” are rare statements made by confirmation students or anyone sitting in the pews today!

You might think that MY favorite students as a pastor have been those who believe and accept my teachings without question, and are totally enthusiastic about hearing Luther’s *Small Catechism* in English (not their parents’ language!). You’d be wrong. My FAVORITE students were the rare persons who totally rejected Christianity, because I saw them as special challenges – why were they so hostile, what kind of abuse or misunderstanding of the message of Jesus had they experienced? My NEXT favorite students were those who listened intently, but challenged what you said, and wanted to prove you wrong – who were not “sponges”, maybe a bit rebellious, but in a Minnesota-nice, polite kind of way. Because THOSE students reminded me of myself! Always look for the student or disciple who questions everything and has some doubts and struggles with the material – because THEY will be the most faithful followers once they work

through their questions! They will have worked through the math problem, and understand that the answers aren't simple! Not so with those who believe everything you say without question and simply memorize the answer, to be confirmed. THEY won't know what faith really is – they'll think it's only knowing the answers, but it's really about knowing, asking, and working through the QUESTIONS of faith! Otherwise, your faith cannot be trusted! Because FAITH is DOUBT, seeking answers. Otherwise what you believe is not really "faith", but only blind loyalty, or a hunch. God doesn't want sheep (even though God loves and cares for them) – God wants disciples – who are willing to argue and question – like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. And Jesus, who loved all his disciples, had a special challenge in Thomas, the disciple with all the questions.

Because Thomas, the disciple who dared question the other disciples who said "I have seen the Lord" wasn't just a "doubting Thomas" – he only wanted what was fair – to see and touch for himself the hands and side of the risen Jesus, and not just take Peter, James, John, and Mary Magdalene's word for it! His faith had to be "his own"! Isn't that what we ALL want?

Today's gospel begins on Easter evening, the night after Jesus had risen from the dead – or at least that's what the disciples had heard, locked away as they were in fear! As they hid in that upper room, Jesus all of a sudden stood among them, and said "Peace be with you". He showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced to see the Lord, breathed on them, and said "Receive the Holy Spirit," and to forgive the sins of any who had sinned among them.

Well, Thomas had not been there, so when the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he said, "Unless I see the marks of the nails and put my finger in his side, I will not believe." He was like that rare confirmation student who had questions, wouldn't believe just anything his friends said, and wanted to see, hear, and touch Jesus for himself. It made for a long, awkward week, because nobody knew if they would see Jesus again. Sure, Jesus had risen from the dead, believe it or not, but would he appear among them more than once? As the days went by, they weren't so sure. The tension only mounted! What if Jesus *hadn't* risen – or they had only dreamt it? What if that one visit was it?

So it was a week later, they were gathered again in the same house. But Thomas was with them this time. It pays not to skip confirmation class, even once! You might miss Jesus! This time Jesus appeared again among them, and said, "Peace be with you!" Thomas put his hands in the mark of the nails and in Jesus' side. "My Lord and my God," Thomas said. And Jesus answered him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have NOT seen, and yet have come to believe." That's you, and me! There were several other signs Jesus did after he rose from the dead, but no more were written down, so deal with it. That's enough! What more do you want? Jesus to feed 10,000? 20,000?

So where are you in this scenario? Are you one of the few who follows with blind faith? Or do you reject it all? I doubt that – or you wouldn't even be here, the Sunday AFTER Easter! Or do you have doubts and concerns, questions that need to be answered? Do you want to see, hear, taste and touch what faith in Jesus is *for yourself* – before you'll make a life-long commitment? That's where most of us are at! And few, if any, take the opportunity – because following without questioning is so much easier, and you can just observe the church from afar via television or a livestream worship service. But THAT's not faith! I prefer pursuing the questions, and taking doubt seriously! Jesus did.

For Jesus himself sought out those who were mostly outside the boundaries of Temple, synagogue and congregation. He first walked by the seashore calling out disciples who were busy fishing, and asked them to follow him. He stopped by Jacob's Well in Samaria and talked to a woman who lingered there. Jesus called a tax collector named Matthew, considered a traitor because he collected taxes for the Romans, keeping some of the proceeds for himself, who must not have been satisfied. Jesus sat in Mary and Martha's kitchen before dinner, sharing his insights into God's kingdom with two women who listened intently.

Today, where will Jesus find YOU, when he goes seeking disciples to follow him? Are you hiding out after Easter, tired after all the preparations and the celebrations, resting for the next big feast day? Are you hiding out in fear, because the world is becoming a scary, dangerous place these days, after bombings of churches in Sri Lanka last Easter Sunday, and the times violent, racist men with guns have entered churches, mosques and synagogues in America and around the world to shoot up people in prayer whom they hate? Looking at the politics and the news, you would definitely think that our democracy is falling apart, and no one is coming to save us – that you and I are on our own! We are just looking for a sign!

Aren't we all just looking for *evidence* – for a *sign* of God's loving presence in our lives, for *assurances* that IT CAN BE TRUE that there is life in the face of death? We want to know: has Jesus REALLY risen from the dead? It's been a week now since we celebrated the good news about that – do you still believe it? Things have quieted down a lot, and it's been over 2000 years since the first Easter. Did it happen? How could it happen? Is it really possible? Did God really do that? Is Jesus still around and among us? Who says?

Maybe you have been like me, looking for good news, hanging around in a hospital room or intensive care unit, sitting, waiting, dozing off, waiting for some words of hope. It may come in a revived, stable heart beat. A loved one wakes up when they have been sleeping or unconscious. We aren't expecting miracles, but a minor miracle happens! A loved one wakes up and smiles at us. You find how many people love you just by showing up. You watch your children care so lovingly for their aging grandfather, lying in the shadow of death, when you are so

fearful and they are full of life and hope. You see how much it means that you have passed on the gospel of God's love in such a tangible way – washing a loved one's body, massaging their legs, feeding them one spoonful of love at a time. Isn't that a miracle in our lives today? That's how we find ourselves in the story.

We make so much of the story that Thomas the “doubting disciple” overcame his doubts by touching the hands and side of the risen Jesus. But what about the examples of courageous witness by people of faith over the centuries, who have “*touched*” the risen Jesus by risking their lives in warfare, to care for wounded and sick men, women and children. People who have, by the strength of faith alone, shared their last morsel of food with another starving human being – out of love! The courage of faith shown by Lutherans like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who dared speak up against Hitler, to seek to end the genocide of Jews and stop a tyrant, when so many Lutherans had sold out to the heresy of white supremacy and blind allegiance to Hitler. Or those who were much less renowned, who quietly hid Jews during the war, or those people of faith today who protect mosques, temples, synagogues, and churches from violence and hate, or those who go to the southern border to distribute food and clothing to migrants seeking asylum, to help reunite children separated from their parents by Trump and his minions, or give shelter to their undocumented neighbors at risk of arrest, detention or deportation. Or by the Augustinian Lutheran Church in Guatemala, which serves indigenous, rural communities by giving girls an education and vocational skills, through the MILAGRO program. Or when someone dissents with a church's teachings that keep women devalued or oppressed, or some left out because of sexual identity or orientation, or children and young people abused – and their dissent is heard! This is the tangible evidence of faith that makes God's love real – for you can taste it, touch it, feel it and hear it spoken. It goes far beyond believing some theological argument or theory explaining the resurrection of Jesus, memorizing some ancient creed of the Church, or seeking the illusive proofs and invisible evidence that makes us believe the unprove-able. Because PROOF isn't the point! The point is faith, active in love! To resist evil, and do good.

For we come to find that what Thomas REALLY wanted was not simply indisputable PROOF of God's miracle of the resurrection – but actually to *experience the miracle of faith for himself! To see, hear, feel, taste and experience for himself the reality of God's mercy, forgiveness, and NEW LIFE when all hope seems lost!* It doesn't just have to be a miracle of a person coming back to life and health when we thought they'd die. That would be great, but we don't ask for that much! We simply want to know that faith is real, that our hope is founded on something true, that it does change our lives when we simply give it a try! You and I want to know that somebody cares, that there is a God who loves us, and there are human beings who care enough to show up for us when we die!

And when we discover that love, and find that faith, you and I will bow our heads and say, “My Lord and my God” – because you will have experienced the divine. You will know the peace of the Lord, and you and I will share the peace with one another, and with our neighbors, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

For the victims of the Chabad Synagogue shootings in San Diego and their families, for the Jewish community, our brothers and sisters in faith, once again subjected to the evil of anti-Semitic hatred and violence. For our world, so consumed by anger and division, that we might understand that the gift of peace Jesus gives in today’s gospel is a command for us to love every child of God. Hear us, O Lord,
Your mercy is great.