

“BELIEVING AGAIN”
Sunday after Easter | John 20:19-31
Jessica R. Jones
Wilton Presbyterian Church
April 19, 2020

Greetings to my WPC family, and all of my sisters and brothers in Christ who are with us today. It’s an honor to be preaching this morning... this task has never felt more important, as we celebrate Eastertide in the midst of a pandemic.

I say this because some days I wake up in the morning and have to check myself -- No, this is *not* a bad dream – this is our new life. Everything has changed in just 4 weeks and the situation keeps getting worse. And yet, you and I are Easter people, and we believe that new life comes after death. And so I stand here, in my *living room*, and preach to you in your living room, because we know that God has been faithful before... and will continue to be faithful now.

The reality is that our community is experiencing sickness and isolation and financial worry. As a result, it is natural to feel afraid – to feel alone – to question our faith... faith that life can be good again, faith that God will provide for us, faith that God is even present... in this very dark time.

In the gospel story for today, the Sunday after Easter, we read about someone else who lacked faith – Jesus’ disciple, Thomas. Thomas has become known as “Doubting Thomas” because he couldn’t believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead.

Can you blame him??

When the other disciples tell Thomas they have seen Jesus, Thomas is unconvinced. He says to his friends: “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.”

The next part of the story is significant – and good news for you and me, who often share Thomas’ unbelief. Instead of reproaching him for doubting, Jesus offers Thomas what he asks for – permission to touch him. “Do not doubt but believe,” Jesus says to Thomas.

Whether or not Thomas actually touches Jesus, we don’t know. But Jesus accepts Thomas for who he is, including his imperfect faith and his skepticism. And then Jesus offers Thomas what he needs so that he can believe... and Thomas believes.

The difference between the disciple Thomas, and you and me roughly two thousand years later of course is that we have not seen or touched the risen Christ. For us, believing in God requires even more faith. Jesus recognizes this challenge when he says, “Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet believed” (John 20:29). In some ways, it’s remarkable that we have faith at all, isn’t it!? Hebrews 11 tells us that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). And so we rely on the Holy Spirit to encourage us, lift us, speak words of truth to us through scripture, music, people and the natural world. Each one of us requires something a little bit different to keep our faith strong.

The Rev. Martin Copenhaver, the President of Andover Newton Theological Seminary points out that “Jesus is like a good doctor, in that he does not give the same prescription to everyone, but approaches his followers in different ways because all our experiences are different and our approaches to life are different. Jesus finds a way to bless us.”

What kind of blessing do you need from God this week? What would be a balm to your soul and a boost to your faith in your situation, your

family, your life's work? An unexpected letter in the mail, a day of warm sunshine, a sign of hope or light?

I'd like to share with you an example of a time this week when God found a way to bless me, giving me exactly what I needed at the right time.

As a chaplain for Norwalk Hospital, I have been making phone calls from my home to Coronavirus patients, and to their families who cannot visit, but instead wait anxiously and helplessly at home. The work has been rewarding... but difficult.

One day last week, I was exhausted and discouraged. I was juggling the parenting of our 1- and 4-year-old children with Andrew throughout the day, while supporting more patients than I had time to call. I was having trouble seeing God in my midst. With each phone call there was more sad news to process with families -- I was tired and ready to be done. It was a little past 6pm when I decided to make one last phone call of the day, to a man I will call "Brian." I asked God to give me the words I needed.

I called Brian to offer my support because his brother was very sick in the hospital. Brian thanked me for calling and shared with me his feelings of fear, sadness and disbelief – he said the doctors weren't sure whether his brother would make it or not. And, to make matters worse, he told me his mother had died in the hospital the day before, too soon for him to arrange Sacrament of the Sick for her (the Catholic sacrament formerly known as Last Rites). Now he wanted to make sure the sacrament was done in time for his brother.

We prayed together and then I promised to call our hospital priest right away. When I explained the situation to Father Paul, he told me to my surprise that he had in fact known Brian's mother and had administered the sacrament to her before her death. He agreed to do the same for

Brian's brother immediately, even though it was 6:30pm (This sacrament is now done over the phone or from afar, as a "spiritual anointing" directed by the Vatican in this special circumstance).

I then called Brian a second time to tell him the good news: Sacrament of the Sick had been given to both his mother and brother. Brian was so relieved and grateful that he started crying, saying, "You know I've got to tell you this -- I've decided to become a social worker after all this is over. Everyone has been so amazing to us and I want to change my life. Thank you and God bless you!"

I hung up the phone and felt a wave of blessing and grace melt over me. I felt with conviction two things: God was present in this family's darkest moment, and second, the Holy Spirit had touched me and renewed my own hope. In a time of fatigue and stress, I had needed a sign of God's presence and God showed this to me through a moment of shared humanity – when Brian shared with me his remarkable hope in the midst of despair.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

At the end of our scripture reading for today, John tells us that the story of Doubting Thomas [and others] were written "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30). Before my phone call with Brian, I was struggling to feel hopeful; after we spoke, I felt new life in the resurrected Christ.

Whatever it is that you need amidst all the challenges you face, Jesus has the power to give you. All you need to do is ask... and expect God to answer. AMEN

Benediction:

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe." May God find just the right way to bless you this week so that you will have life in his name. Amen!