

**Hope Overcomes Doubt – April 23, 2017 – John 20:19-31**  
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Every year we come to this Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, and we hear again the story about Jesus appearing to his disciples while they were locked away in a room. And every year, there is one disciple who missed out on seeing Jesus. Despite the enthusiasm of his comrades he refuses to believe that Jesus actually showed up. I mean really, if this is supposed to be a joke or a prank, it's pretty out of line.

But no, the disciples swear that they really saw Jesus. But Thomas will not believe. He cannot believe, because it doesn't make any sense to him. They saw their teacher die by crucifixion, and his lifeless body taken away and placed in a tomb. Dead, buried, gone. Yet Mary Magdalene came by earlier in the day raving about seeing Jesus in the garden outside the tomb. But grieving people see strange things. Maybe she saw a shadow or had a hallucination. But certainly, not Jesus.

And now the other disciples are either playing sick joke or are caught up in Mary's delusion. There is no way they could be telling the truth. It doesn't make any sense. They can go on in their fantasy, but Thomas is a realist, and he is not falling for it.

Humans are rational beings. We can think and observe, and we can make empirical statements based on what we experience. The more we learn, the more we can understand. We value our ability to rationalize.

Yesterday was Earth Day, and around the nation there were several science marches that occurred. These marches were organized in an effort to promote scientific understanding and rational thought, against what they see as an agenda that puts little value on scientific discovery and scientific facts. These marches and their supporters are especially worried for our planet and all its creatures, including humans, when they witness the interests of the world as a whole replaced by the economic interests of a few. To them, it doesn't make sense.

We humans learn at an early age that our world works according to physical laws. A child takes great interest in building a tower out of blocks, and is delighted to see the blocks repeatedly fall as the tower is knocked down and built back up again. Another child is fascinated to watch the progress of a seed planted in soil then developing into a plant that produces food. I remember, as a child, the thrill I would get in learning something new about this world in which we live. Over time, the order of the world in which we live becomes natural to us.

So, I think Thomas gets unduly judged when he is given the name Doubting Thomas. For example, when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb early that morning, she couldn't believe what Jesus had said before he died, that he would be raised. That possibility didn't even enter her mind. She saw the discarded grave clothes and immediately reasoned that someone had stolen the body. She didn't believe until Jesus spoke her name. And then when Peter ran to the tomb after hearing Mary's fantastic story, he too was bewildered by the empty tomb, not even daring to hope that Jesus could possibly be alive. Even though those early disciples lacked the scientific knowledge that we possess today, they still understood enough to know that dead people don't come back. It wasn't until Jesus physically appeared to them in their room that they were able to believe. And so too with Thomas.

So why should we be any different? Why are we expected to believe in the resurrection when we don't have and never will have the luxury of seeing Jesus in the flesh? We will never touch the wound in his side or the nail marks in his hands and feet. We will never hear his voice.

Unless....

Maybe he will show up here. Right now. In this place...

(Pause)

Well, I guess not today. But, I ask you now. Wasn't there just the tiniest bit of wonder and hope in those silent moments? Did a part of you long for it to be real, for it to be true? Did you feel the slightest bit of stirring within your soul?

That, my friends, is hope.

We humans are rational creatures. We know the world around us is governed by physical laws, that our world was created with order and structure. We understand the process of cause and effect. But there is also within us that part which can see beyond the structure. That senses something outside of the physical. We even have a name for it, of course we, because we classify everything – we call it the spiritual.

I think that is part of the lesson being taught in this story of the resurrection appearance to the disciples. It tells us to look beyond the rational. It tells us to look beyond what makes sense. It tells us to hope. When Jesus came back to the disciples that second time, he approached Thomas not in reprimand, but in understanding. He said to Thomas, "you believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And that is all of us. We are Thomas. We are Mary Magdalene. We are the other disciples. We see death, and rationally believe there is nothing beyond it. Death is the end. But faith defies rationality. Faith taps into the spiritual part of our being, and encourages us to wonder, what if? What if Jesus could arrive here, in our midst, grinning at our doubt and astonishment? What if we believed in something more than what we can see and feel and know?

Hope is what allows us to experience the Risen Christ even in the darkest of moments. When we have pain or grief or despair in our own life, hope allows us to reach out to God, to open ourselves to God, and believe that somehow, some way, God walks with us in those moments. We can't see God or touch God, but there is a knowing within us that believes that God understands us.

Hope is what allows us to look at the world around us and witness the darkest deeds that humans can inflict upon one another, yet still believe that the Risen Christ can be in the midst of it and somehow, some way, bring about redemption. Maybe not right now. But there is a knowing within us that believes, it will be alright in the end.

Doubt is human. But if we allow ourselves to take that chance on faith, hope can overcome it.