

Diane Jamison Fitch
Abington Presbyterian Church
April 28, 2019
John 20:19-31
Having Life!

Today is a busy day in the life of our community here at Abington Presbyterian Church:

- This morning is Older Adult Sunday – the day each year when we celebrate the wisdom and faithfulness of our older members, and honor those who have been members at APC for 50 years or more.
- This morning we celebrate the sacrament of baptism – the baptism of Caitlin and Jeremy Petre’s second son, Jacob.
- This morning our Confirmation class met with session to share their Faith Statements as they prepare for membership.
- And at the end of worship this morning, each of you will be given one of the Peace Cranes that has hung in our sanctuary since the beginning of Advent, to take home.

A busy morning at APC indeed. But is it possible that ALL of these things are connected to each other and to our scripture passage for this Sunday? I believe so!

We start with scripture. The story of Thomas, or "doubting Thomas" as he is so often called, is probably very familiar to all of us. He says, "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." (20:25) Thomas needed proof. The words of the other disciples, saying that they had seen Jesus, were just not enough for him. Thomas needed to see Jesus with his own eyes, to see the wounds left from when they nailed his hands to the cross, and even to touch the wound at his side.

The account of Thomas' unbelief is only found in the Gospel of John, and it takes place a week after Jesus appeared to Mary at the tomb and then to all the disciples except Thomas. When you read through the events of that day, it's easy to just focus on the doubt of Thomas and on Jesus' response "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v29). It's possible to quickly look at this story and decide that Jesus is making an example of Thomas; he's making Thomas look foolish for his doubt, and reprimanding him for his lack of belief. We can imagine a picture of Thomas saying "I need to see it to believe it," and a caption at the top saying this is what not to do. But before we judge Thomas too harshly and make him out to be "the bad guy," I think we need to look a little closer at what takes place in the Gospel of John, before this story about Thomas.

When Jesus appeared to Mary outside the empty tomb, she did not recognize him. She thought he was the gardener. And when Jesus appeared to the other disciples, the account reads "he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." In both of these cases, Jesus had to prove himself. He called Mary by her first name and he showed the disciples his wounds, and only then did they believe that this indeed was the risen Lord. They saw with their own eyes. They had proof. Now comes along Thomas. It would be great if he could believe based on the words of the other disciples. He should believe based on faith and not have doubts and need proof. But Thomas doesn't believe. We don't know why but he is very clear about his conditions for belief: "unless I see ... I will not believe." Thomas is very honest about his doubt.

Surely we are not called to doubt. In the words of Jesus, "Do not doubt, but believe." The "doubting Thomas" is not to be seen as an example for us to follow. But the way Jesus responds to Thomas is an example of what Jesus is willing to do for us. Jesus certainly had a whole range of responses he could have made to Thomas' condition for belief. Jesus could have totally ignored Thomas' demand for proof. He could have proven himself in a different way. He could have responded angrily to Thomas. But regardless of the doubt of Thomas, regardless of the fact that Thomas should have believed the words of the other disciples, Jesus responds with love and care. Jesus meets Thomas exactly where he is. Jesus provides what Thomas needs in order to believe. He mysteriously arrives in the house and offers to Thomas his body and wounds to touch. And Thomas responds with words of belief, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas, once a doubter, is now a believer.

Thomas should not just be remembered for his doubt. He should also be remembered for his honesty. The "honest Thomas" does become an example for us to follow. He knew he needed to see Jesus in order to believe that it was truly the Messiah, risen from the dead, and Jesus offered the proof that Thomas needed. I believe that this truth applies to each of our lives also; if we are honest with Jesus and one another about our doubts and our fears, Jesus will meet us just where we are.

Being honest about our doubts has always been an important part of the way I taught Confirmation Class. In the years when I was one of their teachers, I always encouraged the youth to ask questions, and to be honest about their doubts and things they might find hard to believe. I am in good company with this approach - David Lose says, "a vigorous, vibrant faith comes from the freedom to question, wonder and doubt." I am also a firm believer in this approach because of my own confirmation experience. I still recall my own doubts when I was in 9th grade, to the point that I was unsure about joining the church. I ended up going to see my pastor, who reassured me that questions and doubts are a normal part of our faith.

Over my years of ministry here at APC, people have shared all sorts of things with me - fears, doubts, anger, questions, and pain. So many people are hesitant and afraid of being honest about these feelings, worrying that God won't love them if they are honest. I can assure you that God can handle anything we can dish out. God can handle our tears and our pain and our anger. God will be there, God will support you, God will be faithful, just as Jesus was there and supported Thomas when he was doubting.

So what happens when we try to relate the principles of "honesty with God" and "Jesus will meet us where we are" to our own lives? Several things. First, we discover that we can bring anything to God in prayer. And I mean anything. God already knows all our thoughts and worries. God is waiting for us to be honest enough with ourselves to include our deepest fears and burdens in our prayers. Second, we realize that part of being honest will include doubts from time to time. That is part of being human. If the disciples and those living in the time of Jesus had doubts and needed proof when Jesus was right there with them, and Jesus accepted their doubts, surely our doubts will be accepted. The third thing we come to know is that we can be a new Christian or a long-time Christian, we can be a young Christian or a 50-year church member, we can come with one question or many, but however we come, we will be accepted. Just as we are.

While Jesus may no longer be physically "touchable" to us today, that doesn't mean that Jesus is

"out of reach". As Christians, we feel the love of Jesus in the fellowship we share with other Christians. We see the way God has touched the lives of those around us. It's in the calls and cards from our Deacons. It's in the way we are supported when we are grieving. It's in the outpouring of care when we are ill. It's present when we gather at a potluck or around the communion table. God's love is with us in the life-giving waters of baptism and the sharing of Peace Cranes. Jesus continues to touch our lives through our relationships in our church family.

We may not be able to see Jesus with our own eyes or touch him with our hands, but we can feel the love that Jesus has for us through our church community and relationships. Listen to the words from the Gospel of John, "These are 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."

Our belief brings us life. This is where all that we are doing this morning connects.

- We are celebrating life in the name of Christ when we celebrate the faithful witness of each person who has been part of this caring community for over 50 years.
- We are celebrating life in the name of Christ as we welcome Jacob Petre into our midst.
- We are celebrating life in the name of Christ as we encourage our confirmands in their journey of faith.
- And we are celebrating life in the name of Christ as we take a peace crane from this sacred space and share it in the world – as a sign of God's love and care of us and the whole creation.

Believe in God who calls us to honesty and in Christ who meets us where we are. Believe in Jesus who is "touchable" and who wills to touch our lives. Believe and have abundant life in his name. May it be so.