

Sermon, April 16, 2023  
John 20: 19-31

“ As the Father has Sent Me, so I Send You”

This brief reading has a few issues that I would like to address, beginning with the first verse, which reads, “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”” The words that I want to draw your attention to are “ for fear of the Jews”. To begin with, keep in mind that Jesus and the disciples were all Jewish, as were the majority of the early church. So, when John writes, “ for fear of the Jews”, he was not talking about Jews in general, but about certain authorities who had collaborated with the Romans to have Jesus arrested; and it was the Romans who executed him. Why is this important? Because the sad fact is that statements like this in the Gospel of John encouraged the oldest form of prejudice , i.e., antisemitism. And I point this out especially because this coming Tuesday is Holocaust Remembrance Day, a time to pause and reflect upon the most egregious and shameful chapter in world history, where six million people were killed for no other reason than that they were Jewish. Something like this must never happen again, and we start with the recognition that Jews are our brothers and sisters in faith - that we worship the same God, and that such hateful attitudes have no place in the Church of Jesus Christ!

For the second issue I want to jump ahead to the story of the risen Jesus’ appearance to Thomas. Down through the centuries Thomas has been given a bad rap, as well as the unfair nickname, ‘doubting Thomas’. Jesus appeared to Thomas a week after he had appeared before other disciples who were also skeptical of the news that Jesus had risen until he appeared before them.

The issue of doubt and disbelief is very pertinent for today’s church. In the last few decades 67 million people have given up active attendance to church, continuing with an average of 2.7 million people leaving the church every year. There are many reasons for this. I will mention just a few.

First, we live in a world extraordinarily different from the world inhabited by Jesus and his followers. We live in a scientific and technological age in which life and reality itself are interpreted differently. So, when people begin to see scientific ideas contradicting biblical beliefs, doubts begin to set in. This is unfortunate and need not be the case. In fact, there are those in both the scientific and religious communities who recognize that religion and science are both in search of truth and should be searching side by side.

Secondly, there are those who have been alienated by the Church because they have been told by some churches that they are unacceptable to God because of issues concerning sexuality, gender, etc. forgetting that Jesus had a habit of befriending and embracing those who met disapproval from the status quo. And then there are those who are angered by the fact that certain churches discriminate against gay people, transgender people, immigrants, refugees, or those of different ethnic and cultural existence.

Next there is the issue of scandals within the Church. I remember once standing on a street corner in New York City, waiting for the light to change, and because I happened to be wearing my clerical collar, someone behind me started making derisive comments that suggested I must be a pedophile, of course, ignoring the fact that those guilty of such behavior represent a very small minority of the thousands of priests in the world. Yet the scandals of a few are enough to drive many away from the Church.

Lastly, I'll mention that part of the reason that so many have lost interest in the Church is that the Church may very well be providing answers to questions that no one is asking. Again, we live in an age so very different than the greater part of Church history. We have to find ways to express our beliefs in ways that make sense in a post- modern world!

These are just a few of the reasons that people have doubts and disbelief about what the church has to offer.

But what about those who have remained faithful to the church, but may also have doubts of their own? As I have mentioned before, doubts are a normal thing, and can even be beneficial to your spiritual growth. St. John of the Cross was a Spanish 16th century priest, who, among other things, wrote about what he called the " dark night of the soul" - an extreme form of doubt where one loses all sense of the presence of God, where faith is shaken to the core, where one feels alienated from all things of a religious nature. I've been there myself, many years ago, but discovered that when one emerges from that spiritual darkness into the light, they find that their faith has grown and matured. I like to think of it in relation to the story of the Israelite's exodus from Egypt in their 40 years of wandering, sometimes losing faith, sometimes regaining it, all leading to the realization that sometimes you have to walk through the wilderness to reach the promised land.

Everyone experiences times of doubt, even us clergy, who , like Jacob, must sometimes wrestle with angels. Theologian Paul Tillich said that "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith...". Author Frederick Buechner put it mor quaintly when he said, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Jesus ends his conversation with Thomas, saying, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe". We fall into that category - the blessed who have not seen yet still believe. We don't believe because of evidence in the modern sense of the word. We believe with our heart and our spirit, and through the God-given gift of faith!

Finally, going back to the earlier part of the reading where Jesus says to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". As Christians we are gathered for the sake of being sent. We are called into the world to bear witness to the love of God. This does not mean that we have to beat people over the head with bible verses or tell them that they will burn in hell because they don't believe the same things we do. Religion based on fear is the lowest form of faith.

Francis of Assisi is often credited with saying, "Proclaim the gospel always, and if necessary, use words". In other words, we best express the gospel through acts of kindness, charity, self-giving, mercy and forgiveness, and as advocates for justice and peace. And, so, I bid you to go out beyond these doors, doubts and all, and serve a world much in need of greater love. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Ever loving God, we come before you today with hearts filled with gratitude for all the many blessings- we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, and for your Holy Spirit who guides and inspires us. Lord, we thank you for the gift of faith, and confess that there are times when we struggle with that faith and our beliefs. Help us in our times of spiritual darkness and lead us back into the light. As we are gathered here this morning prepare us in heart, mind, and spirit to go out into the world and proclaim your Word of love in all that we say and do. Help us this week to be mindful of those who suffered and died in the Holocaust, and we pray that the world never experience such a horror again and help us to overcome the blight of antisemitism, asking your blessings upon our Jewish brothers and sisters. And, as always, we lift up those in special need...Amen.