

Second Sunday of Easter 2006

Texts: John 20:19-31
 1 John 1:1 – 2:2

John 20:19-31

This passage continues telling how the risen Christ was experienced by his followers; this time with the focus being on “doubting” Thomas.

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

John, writing to his little children – a term of endearment the now elderly apostle uses for those he has raised in faith – encourages them to walk in light and to acknowledge their sin.

Sermon in a Nut Shell

The reason why John has written his stories about Jesus and Thomas is not that we should believe. They are written that we might have life – the life that is found in Jesus. That is, mere belief is not the final result. Rather, belief is meant to be a means to the fruit which is life itself. John is not asking us to believe the unbelievable. Rather he is asking us to look at Jesus and see if there is life in him. Not just existence; but deep life, true life, abundant life, life in its fullest, life as it is meant to be. And if there is, if that is what we see, then let us question our beliefs so that we too might share in that life through believing Jesus is the Life.

Sermon Thoughts (Not the Sermon)

Seeing Life

We know that the texts in the Bible were written down for folks like you and me – people who were not alive at the time of Jesus; people who would only know about Jesus if those who were there wrote down their memories so that they could be told to future generations.

And the last few verses in John make this explicitly clear. The “**you**” in “these are written so that **you** may come to believe,” is you and you and you and me. These are written so we here today might believe. And, come to believe, as Jesus points out, “without having seen.”

In a not so subtle way, the story of Thomas is not just a story about Thomas, it is a story about you and I. Because, truth be told, wouldn't you like to be able to see and hear and touch Jesus for yourself? To have been there, seen him, heard him? To be able to believe as Thomas does because you have seen and touched for yourself? To believe because we have seen: seeing is believing. But you and I must believe without seeing.

And I must confess that as a minister I have spent considerable time in sermons and study groups trying to interpret the Bible story so that it is believable for our times. Christian faith ought to mean that we do not have to give up using our brains; give up asking, “Yes, but what does that mean? How am I to understand what the Bible says given what we now know?” For example, given what we now know about disease and healing, what should I believe about the healing stories in the Bible? And given what we now know about the universe, what should I believe about the creation stories in the Bible?

However, it is important to read the whole verse, because John is not interested in us simply believing in Jesus. He is not interested in us merely giving our consent to a set of facts, a history, or a creed about Jesus.

Verse 31 reads:

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.

The reason why John has written his stories about Jesus and Thomas is not that we should believe. They are written that we might have life – the life that is found in Jesus. That is, mere belief is not the final result. Rather, belief is meant to be a means to the fruit which is life itself.

Now this raises an interesting twist. If you are willing to concede that in Jesus we see a quality of living, a quality of life that is attractive, then we might use that experience to examine our beliefs and ask, “Does this belief give life, the quality of life that I see in Jesus?”

And we might ask this question not just to beliefs we have about Jesus, the Bible, and so on; but also of beliefs about poverty, addiction, justice, fairness, hard work, etc. Governments, businesses, schools, advertising and banks are always trying to get us to believe that certain things are “true” about the economy, global trade, the environment, human rights, national security, etc. One way we can test whether to believe what we are being told to believe is to ask, “Does this belief give life – the quality of life that I see in Jesus’ life?”

We must ask this question about the beliefs we have about our own selves – what others have taught us to believe is “true” about what sort of person we are. Do the beliefs we hold about our own selves give life to us, or do we find ourselves plagued with self-doubts, burned out, or lacking true friendships?

And we must ask this question about our own congregation. Does what we believe – and how we behave – give life? Give the quality of life we see in Jesus?

The quality of life that we see embodied in the life of Jesus is not dependant on whether this or that historical event happened exactly as it is told in the Bible. John is not asking us to believe the unbelievable. Rather he is asking us to look at Jesus and see if there is life in him. Not just existence; but deep life, true life, abundant life, life in its fullest, life as it is meant to be. And if there is, if that is what we see, then let us question our beliefs so that we too might share in that life through believing Jesus is the Life. This is good news in deed. This is the gospel for this day.