

## “But Can You Believe It?”

By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy

Acts 5.27-32

John 20.19-31

April 24, 2022

One of the joys, or maybe concerns of being a minister is that I am nearly always thinking theologically, imagining how something I experience or witness throughout the week might fit into a sermon. It's an occupational hazard. Earlier this week one of my kids refused to believe something because they didn't see it happen. And I said out loud in the kitchen, “You won't believe something unless you see it!” and from the other room Rob said, “Stop training our kids to be theologians.” How often, though, do we rely on our senses to believe something? Kids aren't the only ones who do this – we all need some sort of proof, or research or statistics to believe something. It seems to be a human trait.

Our world has truly looked at belief and facts quite differently in the past decade. I think even the definition of “fact” is up for debate, and sources have been rightfully questioned in previous years. We wonder who knows the facts, where the facts came from, and what proof someone has to show it.

It is difficult to take anyone's word on some subjects. So, I could see the hesitation of Thomas. I could understand his desire to want proof. If someone approached me and said that a loved one had been raised from the dead, I don't know that I would believe it immediately either. It's not a lack of faith so much as a deep relationship within that faith to trust that you can ask questions. I really dislike how Thomas has been labeled the Doubter. Just like how Judas became the Betrayer. One action should not define who they are as disciples. We only have a few stories from their lives, from other people's perspectives, and their entire life probably had more to tell about themselves and their relationships with Jesus.

The Gospel passage helps us remember that we are incredibly sensory beings. God gave us different senses so that we can experience the world in more than one way. I am a visual learner and so I will always absorb information through reading and pictures better than I will through auditory listening. But I also know that some people can hear things once and remember it forever. And this is the beauty of this passage, I think. The disciples saw Jesus with their eyes but Thomas said, “No, I need to touch his hands and his side.” If anything I appreciate that Thomas knew what he needed to believe.

Sometimes I don't think we always know what information we need to believe something. We can gather all the information that is in front of us and still not understand something. Still not know what questions to ask. And that's OK. I also think it's important to recognize that Jesus met the disciples where they were in that moment. In fact, Jesus offered his hands and his side to the disciples, before Thomas even asked. When Jesus walked in the room he said, “Peace be with you and the disciples sort of stared at him confused. It wasn't until he showed them his hands and side that the disciples even knew who he was. Jesus does not deny

them the experience. And Jesus meets us where we are and all of our doubts and all over questions and all of our wanderings.

I wonder what questions you have about your faith. I think that we have seasons of doubt and questions. I don't think that we question all the time but that we do question over and over and I think that we have to be reassured that asking faith questions is normal. In fact, I think that it is to be commended because when we don't ask questions we don't learn more and go deeper into faith.

When I was in Mexico I was simultaneously surprised and not surprised by seeing the tents set up in La Plaza. A local pastor had prepared us for what we would see as people from all over had traveled to Reynosa to wait to enter the United States, but I don't think that you can be prepared for something like this. Tents were set up nearly on top of each other with four or five people per tent waiting for health screenings, waiting for visas, waiting for a better life. When we asked the pastor to La Plaza what we could do he told us to tell the story. He said that the news wasn't telling the story correctly and there's so much misunderstanding and that often people didn't believe their stories.

I kept thinking how uncomfortable I was that they wanted people to go down there in order to believe their stories because I wish that they could just be believed. But maybe that's something within us as humans, that some of us need some sort of proof for good and for bad.

Perhaps sometimes we don't want to know more. We don't believe, we don't ask questions, because it means facing our mortality. It means facing our faults. Having faith is hard work. It isn't simply believing, it is wrestling with what it means to be human, what it means to die, and what it means to live. It means taking it all in, asking the questions of suffering and sometimes admitting we have no answers. It is embracing the Word even when we don't fully understand it and going out into a broken world in which we try to find healing and peace.

Are there some topics we do just have to believe without being told over and over again? When I think about the environment and how we have limited time to turn around our habits as a planet, I wonder how many more facts we need. Maybe at some point it isn't about facts. I know that my trash can is currently filled with to go containers and every time I looked at them this week I thought, "ugh – the environment." But I didn't change my actions. Sometimes we have to have a radical shift in our own experiences. This is what Jesus offers the disciples – he didn't just send them a letter for them to think, "Well, this *might* be Jesus writing from heaven, but did we analyze the handwriting?" Jesus showed up. And scared them a little, and waited patiently for them to believe. Sometimes we need facts, sometimes we need experience.

The Acts passage is after Jesus has ascended and people have been told by the Empire not to preach in Jesus name. And they have ignored that and now they must answer to the Empire. They respond to the accusations of preaching in Jesus name by continuing to speak of him and refusing the powers of this world. They are perhaps more aware than they ever were who Jesus was and what he lived and died and rose again for and they are willing to risk their lives for it.

I think this passage is tricky in our current context, as well. I know many Christians who would claim to be following God's Word and not human authority – but who determines the translation of God's Word? How do we know what it is exactly that God is calling us to do? There were people who stormed the Capitol building that claimed God told them to do that – but as a faith leader, that's not the God I serve. There were Christians who committed wars they called holy because they thought God called them to do so – but not all Christians believed that. What is the litmus test for human authority and God's authority? If Christians believe that God puts people in positions of political authority, and many do believe this, then why would we need to go against human authority? What is then the test for knowing if a leader is following God's Word?

None of it is clear – and one Christian's perspective is different than another – and if we have 100 Christians in a room we might have 100 different opinions. This might be where we start bringing in our facts – but faith has few facts.

Faith is that we don't have to believe it all and we don't even have to believe a majority of it. In fact Presbyterians ask if you believe in the reformed tenets but we don't have a list of those tenets. We offer space for a wide variety of beliefs because we also recognize that we don't have all the answers. My own framework of faith will look different than yours, perhaps, but it also keeps growing and changing, and I make repairs to that framework often. When I think about scripture and faith, I discern the meaning within a group of trusted people with a diversity of experiences who also don't claim to have all the answers. If that held belief is harmful to a group of people, then I think it falls under human authority.

When we look at faith, can we say that we believe enough? What is enough? Do you keep asking questions? Can you say that we believe enough that we will walk together and hold on another's questions and sorrows?

I pray that your faith is full of questions, and that you will keep asking those questions, and that you will sit with one another as we walk this path of faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.