

The Honest Follower

Lesson: 1 John 3:1-7, John 20:19-31

Most of the time we live like the other followers in the room. We believe - maybe because we have already seen the evidence and maybe not - but we wonder why someone else can't believe, or why they believe differently, or why they don't believe and don't care. We wonder how people just can't believe...

Increasingly - and I mean by big margins - a lot of people don't believe ...in church, in "organized religion," "that the resurrection happened," "in God." They have their reasons - and there are a lot of different ones - *and all of them have to do with not being able to believe more than not believing!*

We have labels for folks who don't believe - who aren't sure...

Skeptics: "Well maybe, but I can't be sure. I have my doubts." Technically, the word means "relating to the theory that certain knowledge is impossible" The sure thing is that most all of us are skeptics about something.

Like the resurrection - one way or another. I mean you can try to explain the resurrection in some ways that will make anyone not believe it. And no matter how full-of-faith we try to be, the resurrection stretches right to the edge of, well, unbelieving. Or at least if we are honest, it should make us sympathetic to the skeptics. Technically, "certain knowledge is impossible" about the resurrection.

Agnostics: "Well, maybe, but I have my doubts, and I do believe it's futile to find out." Technically, the word means: "nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God or of anything beyond material phenomena." We can't know much.

With the resurrection, the agnostic's response is, "Show me the body." Interestingly, this is really more pointed to stopping the discussion. By and large, self-described agnostics are just folk who want to protect themselves by limiting their questions. "Please don't confuse me with questions that don't have answers." We all know people like that. We are some of those people about something.

Agnostic is a pretty global label. Here's the sad thing: agnostics cannot believe in love either, because they become committed to not believing in anything that can't be proved to them. Of course when they do meet love face-to-face, they have to call their agnosticism into doubt.

Then there are those *other* people on the opposite side of the coin. They are what I call the "too-sures."

...the ones who are never in doubt, as in... "I may be wrong, but I'm never in doubt."
...the ones who worry more about being sure more than they worry about being right.
...the ones who are certain because they don't want to be confused with evidence to the contrary.

...the ones who argue when they have every reason to change their view - except admit they were wrong.

“Too-sures” won’t let new facts, or maybe new questions, confuse them. Have you ever heard someone say, “The Bible says it, I believe it. That settles it!” – for them, at least. I’ve spent a little time looking at the Bible, and I have found that the more I look, the more questions I have about a lot of things. And those questions have grown me a lot more than my certainties.

I love skeptics and agnostics and “too-sures.” And I think they all have one thing in common: when they come up on situations that have questions that can’t be answered, they all get uneasy, and a little afraid. They run away, or they run to “sure.”

I’m grateful that Thomas wasn’t one of the “too-sures.” He was just honest, very honest in a very human way, like the rest of us with our skeptical, can’t know questions. We single out Thomas, and forget that all the other people in the room had been there the week before, and felt just like Thomas ...until Jesus appeared to them.

I don’t know why we give Thomas a hard time and call him a “doubter.” Jesus says to him, “Don’t doubt, but believe” but Jesus wasn’t giving him a label for eternity. He isn’t judging Thomas. He is trying to help him. He does not want Thomas to stay stuck in this awful sense of loneliness with his questions and doubts that kept him away. You might imagine Thomas thinking all those other followers didn’t seem as troubled, and there must be something wrong with him.

So, Jesus knows Thomas’ question. And Thomas gets an answer for his honesty. It wasn’t the answer that ended his doubts or made him certain. But Jesus was able to meet his honesty, and assure him that he had faith enough and more. Thomas’ honest need and human love had put him with his friends that second Sunday night, on the chance - a hope against hope - that Jesus might show up again. His faith was greater than his failings, more than his not knowings. He trusts more than he knows, just like we do.

Jesus shows up, and does more than some trick to prove the resurrection. He shows up the way Thomas needs him to show up. He shows up that night for Thomas.

Jesus expects that there will be lots of people like Thomas, who have trouble believing without seeing. Lots of skeptics who can’t be sure, lots of agnostics who think there is no point in going any further because they can never be sure. Jesus says they – no, WE – will really be blessed precisely because we have not seen. And scripture tells us that Jesus did many other signs to help people believe that he is Messiah, the Son of God, ...the Lord of earth and heaven, and the God who loves and saves us by giving us a new, deeper life in his everlasting, spirit life.

Jesus, the risen Lord, shows up in the way people need him to show up, so that they can trust in the face of doubt.

So, here we are a week after the empty tomb Sunday, gathered in a room we call a sanctuary in a world of trouble and doubt and fear and unbelieving - and a lot of other things we find too easy to believe about people and evil. Here we are, and let me say that hopefully we are honest followers like Thomas - which makes us cousins of the skeptics and agnostics in our doubt and questions.

We are more blessed here than they were there - because this is not all new to us like it was to them. Christ is with us in ways that are not confined to brick walls and high roofs and stained glass.

Worship can never be a celebration of the certainty of the "too-sures." Real living is always deeper than surface certainty, and this is a place for people who cannot be content with limiting their lives to shallowness. Christ meets you in the place that is deeper than skin deep. He meets us past his scars and ours.

Where have you seen Jesus appear when you were in a place of need deep down? Where has Jesus shown up for you when you were in that place of unbelieving and not trusting? Were you afraid the sky was falling in a Doctor's office? Were you running for cover when you lost a job or the market cut your retirement in half?

Were you going about your normal day when a radio or television told you that planes had been aimed at buildings and killed too many people? Are you wondering what security is when you don't feel very secure one day to the next?

Do you doubt that much of anything around you is going to change for the better? Are you skeptical that you have the energy or the capacity to make some change in your life that you know you have to make to change your life? Have you become an agnostic about your own future - just submitting yourself to the fates and afraid to believe that there is a God who loves enough or is powerful enough in ways of mystery and grace to help you change anything?

Do you come here, and look around the room at all the saints gathered, and think you can't be a good as some of them, because they seem to be "pretty-sures" if not completely-sures, and you are not sure about much of anything at all some days?

Do you wish just one time that you would get some sign to get you past your unbelieving in the middle of your trying to believe?

Well, I can't conjure up Jesus, or even something that looks like him on a piece of cloth or in the bark of a tree or some other object that can fool some of the people some of the time. But can I show you something different? ...something that might be in front of you more than you think, and you just aren't looking at it in a way that you can see it?

Thomas never touched Jesus' hands and sides. He didn't have to. Whatever he saw - it was enough for him to trust in the face of what he could not know. Thomas did not hunt for an explanation of proof in the mystery of Jesus showing up. He saw what he saw, and he trusted - it was that simple.

Let's be honest, too - we have no idea what the risen Lord actually looked like. We have the reports of the people who saw him show up in the way he showed up for them and helped them recognize them. But he looked to different to most all of them. What did he look like when he showed up for you?

I've had some times in my life when I really needed something important for someone I loved. Nothing I did seemed to help, and I became skeptical that anything would make a difference, that certainty was an impossibility. My worry became prayers, and I "prayed without ceasing." I never saw the scars in hands, but I'm sure that Christ showed up to help me more than once - a couple of times when I didn't realize it until later.

Early on, I spent a few years after seminary as a quiet agnostic. I didn't shout about it, and tell people I didn't believe in God anymore. But I just "put God on moratorium" because my questions had no answers at all and I gave up asking. Out of that experience of ignoring God, I finally came to a place where I realized that God had not been ignoring me for a long time. When I turned my heart and tuned my spirit to the questions again, God was able to speak in a quiet voice until I was able to sing again. Like Thomas, my questions that would not go away were signs that I had more faith in Christ than I thought I had.

I take some comfort that even John was content with "it does not yet appear what we shall be" in the future here or there. But one thing he knew in his faith and not knowing. "When he is revealed, we shall be like him." From those signs I have seen, I still cannot see too far, but I can trust far enough. I cannot tell you that I am a "too-sure" - or even that I am sure about most things. I am content with whatever appears.

And like John, I will tell you one thing I am sure about, and if you have not gotten a sign lately in some place of need, then I want you to take heart and keep your eyes and ears open. The sign is there, whether our not you see it. Christ is with you when you don't even realize it.

What is the "one thing" I am sure about? Just this: God is relentless! Relentless! "...incessent, oppressively constant" to give you the dictionary definition. God is "pressingly constant." Christ is a presence that we can feel pressing on us - that close and all the time.

Christ is relentless! Christ's faith in you never fails, even when fear fills you. Christ's hope for us never disappoints, even when clouds cover and the dawn disappears. Christ's love never lets go. Even if your grip is weak, his hand will hold on to you with that added, gentle pressure that lets you know he will not leave.

What Thomas learned in that room is the good news of saving love in this room:

Jesus, the risen Lord, always shows up in the way people need him to show up, so that we can trust in the face of doubt. In fact, Christ is always with us, and never leaves!