

**“The Grace, and Limits, of Doubt”**  
**John 20:19-31**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**2nd Sunday after Easter**  
**April 21, 2020 during the Pandemic**

I know it's a mistake to read every text through the lens of COVID-19 but this one made that approach especially difficult. Last week Jesus was the perfect poster child for the public health campaign. “Do not hold onto me,” he told Mary Magdalene, who was not doing a very good job keeping her social distance. But public health Jesus falls apart this week. He enters someone else's house (not permitted) and breathes on the disciples. Then he comes back the following week and has people sticking their dirty hands in his open wounds. Everything in me just wants to scream, “Coronavirus! Coronavirus!”

But public health problems aside, it's comforting to see that one week after Easter, the disciples are stuck, like us, behind closed doors wondering, like us, if Easter made any difference. “A week later,” the text says, “Jesus' disciples were again in the house.” It's groundhog's day for them all over again. The only thing different for them from last week is that Thomas, who was absent when the resurrected Christ first made an appearance, is now with them. He had been absent last week on Easter when the disciples were in the same place, behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. The text actually says for fear of the Jews, but by now many of us know that “fear of the Jews” is the author's community talking. Historically this phrase wouldn't make sense since all the people locked behind the doors were also Jews. The fear of those Easter evening disciples must have been fear that what happened to Jesus at the hands of the state could happen to them.

It's important to remember that fear before we start talking about Thomas and his doubt. Those early disciples weren't having purely intellectual conversations from the comfort of their armchairs. Do you believe or not believe that Jesus was this or that from a safe, philosophical distance. Following Jesus - believing in his authority and his way - came with potential costs - suffering and possibly death. Belief wasn't casual. It was life or death. Thomas seemed to catch on to this early in his time with Jesus. He only speaks three times in the New Testament, all three times in John's Gospel. The first is on the way to the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus, speaking of the death of his friend says “For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” Thomas, retorts, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Death has been on Thomas' mind early on and he seems skeptical that the Jesus way is going to win.

The second time is again in reference to that line between death and life at the last supper. “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus tells his troubled disciples. “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going.” But Thomas is the kid who asks the questions that everybody wants to know but is afraid to ask. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

I’ve heard it suggested that Thomas’ problem is that he doesn’t believe Mary Magdalene. She is the first witness to the resurrected Christ and the first preacher proclaiming resurrection hope. But by the time Thomas says “unless I see Jesus for myself, I won’t believe,” every one of the disciples is testifying to the risen Christ. I think Thomas’ problem is not really a problem to most of us. It’s a virtue. We’ve learned to question the way subjective experience is presented as objective fact. We’ve learned that kind of skepticism for good reason. It’s so obvious during this Coronavirus pandemic that we barely have to name it. We can all see the way a rumor that people of color can’t catch the coronavirus can put people of color more at risk on top of the structural racism that already leaves people of color, as a whole, more vulnerable to the virus. We can all see the way neglecting data early on, left our nation and others ill prepared for the reality that has come. As our fossil fueled economy rests, we all see the way climate change denials have left the planet in some hot water that we’ll be dealing with for generations to come.

We’ve learned how to be skeptical of claims to truth that aren’t backed up by data to support it. Few of us would want to criticize Thomas for that. We want to commend him for it. Yet Thomas’ “seeing is believing” approach doesn’t necessarily lead to the whole truth.

There are some truths that we can’t see in the conventional sense. Cyrus Habib knows this. The young lieutenant Governor of the state of Washington trekked up Mount Kilimanjaro last year to fulfill a lifelong dream. He made it to the top which would impress some people, since Habib has been blind since the age of 8. But the impressive part to me was Habib’s description of what he experienced. “You feel it,” Habib told Frank Bruni of the *New York Times*. “You feel the whole world dropping away. I have a sense of spatiality, based on acoustics and maybe even other types of senses that I can’t scientifically describe. I can feel when I’m in a huge cathedral. I can feel when I’m in a small bedroom.” At the top of Kilimanjaro, he said, “It felt to me like I was on the moon, because of the thinness of the air. You’re kind of high — lightheaded — and you feel this sense of vastness that’s not just around you but also below you.

You can feel it in your body.” There are some things that can’t be “seen” with conventional sight.<sup>1</sup>

Yet individual sight of any kind can be misleading for yet another reason. We have to use our brains to interpret and weigh what we are “seeing.” Some would say that is exactly the problem with some of our more inept leaders who trust what they see with their own eyes more than what the data tells them. “The apparatus that sees the world is over 400 million years old,” one social psychologist told a reporter recently. “The prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain that comprehends projection models from the C.D.C. — is maybe 2.5 million years old. That’s brand-new, in evolutionary terms. It’s still in beta testing.”<sup>2</sup> And yet this is the part of the brain that we need the most in addressing the very things that we can’t see such as climate change, and viruses that attack the body long before we see its effects. Seeing, it turns out, might lead to belief, but it doesn’t necessarily make that belief any more accurate.

So how are we to differentiate between beliefs that we should only hold when we see with our own individualized ways of “seeing” and those that we may only see through the testimony of others? John’s Gospel answered the question by saying, the whole purpose of writing this book is so that you can believe through what others have seen. You can believe that Jesus was the presence of the divine in flesh and blood through the testimony of others. But the very existence of this book, created at the time when Jews who believed Jesus was Messiah were banned from the synagogue also raises questions about this approach. Obviously many other people did not believe in the testimony of others. Testimony was not enough for everyone. It may still not be enough for some of us.

Rather than viewing Thomas as a problem to be solved, a doubter that the church should be in the business of converting, I wonder if it’s better to think about Thomas as that doubting part of us, the fabric of our being. As a grieving friend who is also a minister wrote to me recently, “I trust that God is the renewing force in the scientific processes all around us. I also believe weird woo woo spirit heaven things are real and matter and somehow find me when I am in the midst of a ‘maybe it’s all horse crap’ moment. I have no patience for anyone who is certain about either extreme though. I can handle poets and music and kids and birds.” I love the way my friend, in testifying to the reality of God’s searching presence, also acknowledges that possibility that this faith business could all be crap. It’s almost like she knows that trying to silence any one of those voices - the scientific skeptic or the new agey mystic, would not only be unsuccessful, it would rob us of our humanness. That essential curiosity and desire

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bruni, newsletter, *The New York Times*, April 15, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Senior, “Trump’s Brain: A Guided Tour,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/opinion/trump-coronavirus-dewine.html>. The expert quoted is Daniel Gilbert, the Harvard social psychologist and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*.

to know truth impossibly weaved together with our sense that there is a love that finds our impossibly small selves in the universe. A truth that our infant brains just aren't big enough to behold.

“The reasonable [person] says in his head, ‘There is no other life after this,’ but only the wicked says it in [their] heart.” So said the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno describing that essential truth that the very things we cannot prove rationally may still be truth that drives our life, that gives us purpose. “Since the wicked [person] is possibly only a [person] who has been driven to despair, will a human God condemn them because of their despair? Their despair alone is misfortune enough.”<sup>3</sup>

I'd rather live, rationally yes, trusting with my friend, that God is working through the scientific process. Flattening the curve makes sense because someone discovered that math could describe a reality and the description of that reality could help save lives. God gave us brains and someone used theirs to invent statistics and others applied it to help us stay safe together. I want leaders who listen to public health data rather than their own two eyes just as I believe with all my heart that the doctors and nurses in our hospitals who have gone to school to gain wisdom about our bodies are the healers that God has sent to us now.

And at the very same time, there are some kinds of realities that we don't have understanding, knowledge, or language to describe. Chief among them is the experience of God's visitation, God's presence planted so deep in my soul, the sense of God's love watching over us yes, but in a personal, particular way. A sustaining love that I do not understand and probably never will. Love that gets to us behind every door that we try to lock for our own self-protection, showing us that while we can never erase our wounds, it is possible to live with them. A presence that evokes faith, not in some defensive sense of needing to prove anything to others, but a trust that life is good, that I am enough for the tasks and the life to which God calls me only because God has declared this to be true.

I'm in good company with many of you who have, at different points in your life journeys, expressed something similar, and also with Cyrus Habib. That young lieutenant governor on the rise in Washington State politics stunned many when he announced last month that he wouldn't be running for reelection this November. Instead, he'd be joining the Jesuit priesthood. Habib saw that the celebrity culture of politics is a never ending river that carries people along whether it's still good for them or not. There's always the next pillar to climb up on. That's true for most good things in life. “That can-do, can-overcome mentality is fantastic and can get you far,” Habib said in the interview. “But if hardened into an ideology of its own, it can crowd God out,

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<sup>3</sup> Miguel Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life: Philosophical Thoughts on Life, Death, Adversity, Consciousness, Religion and the Personal Achievement of Authenticity*, translated by J. E. Crawford Fritch, (Pantianos Classics), first published 1921, p. 174.

because it makes you into a kind of god and says: 'I'm not a contingent creature. I'm completely independent.'"

He says his decision has nothing to do with the current crisis. But Frank Bruni observes that it does "reflect the sort of moral inventory that many people conduct at a time of great suffering, the type of spiritual epiphany they experience in the face of terrifying uncertainty."<sup>4</sup> The truth that even as something naked to the eye attacks us all, something greater is at work within and beyond us.

I know this is a difficult time for many of us. The difficulties are likely to multiply. All the more reason to remember those early disciples, behind locked doors, grieving their losses and the shattering of their own world. There God found them. There God gave them a peace in an odd way beyond understanding. May the wounded love of God find you, too.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Bruni, "A Politician Takes a Sledgehammer to his own Ego," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/opinion/sunday/cyrus-habib-jesuit.html>.