

A Living Hope

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 1, 2011: The Second Sunday of Easter.*

Based on John 20:19-31

In the church world, the week after Easter is to clergy what the week after April 15 is to tax accountants: a time to collapse in exhaustion, to try to catch up on all the sleep you missed during the previous weeks. To discover anew that there is life outside church. To lie on the sofa or on the new green grass of the Great Lawn and read novels that don't contain any church words at all.

One of my favorite cartoons shows a church just as the last Easter service has ended, people streaming out the doors, the words "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" still echoing in the air. The next frame shows a priest, still in vestments, collapsed in the office chair, head back, arms and legs splayed, with the thought bubble: "Christ is risen. The clergy are dead."

Our Easter services at St. Bart's were glorious—incredible music, powerful preaching, beautiful liturgies. You could see and feel the joy and celebration. People were so happy! I myself couldn't stop beaming.

This year, the week after Easter held another joyous church event that involved billions of people around the world. I tried to imagine what it would be like to do Holy Week and Easter and then immediately shift into the high gear of the royal wedding. Part of me thought, "Cool! I'd like to be part of that!" Another part of me returned gratefully to my novel.

All day Friday, when I wasn't watching clips of the wedding on my laptop and television, I kept running into people—bleary-eyed but delighted people—who had gotten up early to watch the wedding as it was happening. Here was a stunningly beautiful young couple, clearly fond of each other, carrying fresh hope and promise not only for themselves and their families, but also for a nation and for the institution of the monarchy. Amidst the flawless organization and the rich pageantry that is Anglican liturgy at its best flowed a relaxed feel with true joy and celebration. People were so happy! One of my favorite videos of the wedding shows one of the black-robed vergers in the wedding coming back into Westminster Abbey after all the guests have left. With a huge grin on his face, and a furtive look behind him, he turns cartwheels back down the aisle of Westminster Abbey. (I've made a note for St. Bart's vergers. Stay tuned—you may see some changes.)

This year, though, the week after Easter also held something else: the devastating storms and tornadoes that tore through the South, leaving hundreds dead, thousands injured, matchsticks where homes used to be, the devastation still too great to count. One house completely destroyed, the house next door untouched. A pair of delicate silver earrings still resting on the dresser, the house around it completely gone. Papers from one home found in another town 100 miles away. One child sucked away by the wind, her sister untouched in her crib.

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Inside, with windows and doors locked to keep out . . . the authorities, the tornado bearing down on you. Locked in . . . for fear of failure, fear of betrayal, fear of risk, fear. Most of us, at some point, know what it is to be locked inside, afraid.

We have today, of course, the well-known story of Thomas, often called "Doubting Thomas." I don't think that's accurate. I think Thomas gets a bad rap. Here's why.

Thomas isn't doing anything the other disciples haven't already done. Mary Magdalene didn't recognize the risen Jesus at first, earlier that morning, there outside the tomb where she'd gone to anoint his body. She thought he was the gardener. When Jesus called her by name, she did recognize him and she told the other disciples. They apparently didn't believe her, because here they are that same night, locked in the room.

Thomas doesn't ask for anything the other disciples didn't get. Jesus showed them his hands and his side; why shouldn't Thomas get to see the same thing?

Thomas is a realist. When Jesus wanted to go back to Jerusalem the other disciples tried to discourage him, saying "If you go back there, they will kill you." Thomas, the realist, counts the cost and goes into it with his eyes open. "Let's go with him. We'll die with him, all of us together." Thomas has just watched his friend and teacher die, nailed to a cross. So when the others tell him they've seen Jesus alive again, he doesn't believe them, just like the disciples didn't believe Mary Magdalene.

Thomas is honest about what he needs: he needs to see and to touch in order to believe. Did you notice? Jesus generously offers Thomas what he needs to believe.

The other thing that gets us off track in this story is this word translated for us as “doubt.” The Greek actually carries a meaning closer to “unbelieving.” To “be believing” is to give your heart to, to commit yourself to. Do not be unbelieving, uncommitted, without faith; but be believing, give your heart to this, be committed, have trust, have faith.

Doubting Thomas? I don't think so. Honest Thomas, demanding Thomas, committed Thomas, believing Thomas? Yes. And Thomas does come to be believing, to have faith, as we know from his reply (the strongest confession of faith in the entire gospel of John): “My Lord and my God!”

Do we believe this story? Maybe, maybe not. Are these historically verifiable facts recorded in this Gospel? No. Is John telling the truth? Our gospels offer several different accounts of Jesus' followers experiencing the risen Christ, none exactly the same. What could it mean that we've inherited holy scriptures that contain deliberate differences, and even some contradictions?

John Westerhoff, in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, suggests we humans (though he's writing specifically for Christians) develop faith as a process—a lifelong process. Westerhoff identifies four stages of maturing faith.

Experiential faith grows from participating in the customs and rituals of those closest to us. Whatever family we happen to be born into, we absorb their faith. We learn from what we experience through our senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting. We learn by practice.

If that goes well, faith continues to develop with **Affiliation**, when we belong to an *accepting* community. Worship services, small groups and classes, volunteering together—these shared activities deepen our relationships with those in the community. And through those relationships, our faith—our commitment—grows. We learn from each other.

Then comes the **Searching** stage. We grow by questioning: Is this really what I believe? Does God really exist? If God is all-powerful and all-merciful, then how can there be such suffering in the world? How could God let this happen? We have to find our own answers. We may need to un-learn some things.

The fourth stage is that of Owned faith. Having answered our questions, we now can say, This IS what I believe. THIS is what I believe. Now it's our own faith, no longer merely the faith of our parents, family or friends. Doubts and questions are still there, but the faith that you own, you try to live out by personal and social action. You're willing and able to stand up for what you believe.

This process of maturing (growing) in faith is not necessarily neat and linear. Once we reach the Owned stage, it's not like we get the award and the t-shirt and we're done, or we've crossed the finish line and get to take the trophy home. We are always growing and changing. Even once we think we have it all worked out, we have decided THIS is what I believe, things happen that test our faith. The storms of life come upon us. New questions crop up and prompt more searching, maybe even a new affiliation.

Westerhoff describes these stages in terms of age, from birth to early adulthood. We may get stuck in one stage, or get started later in life . . . like Thomas. However it happens, one thing is for sure: we need the nurture and support of community for our faith to grow and develop.

As far as I can tell, this “becoming believing” is a process that continues our whole lives. As Episcopalians, and particularly as St. Bartians, we are fortunate, very fortunate. Our Episcopal/Anglican tradition actually encourages questioning. In worship services, in any of our classes or groups, such as EXPLORE and LIFE 101, and in any volunteer activities, questions are welcome and respected, even encouraged. That is a great gift.

During the 9 a.m. service this morning we recognized our Youth Acolytes, a dedicated group of about 15 young people who get up extra early on Sunday mornings to get here and serve in our 9 a.m. service, including—for the first time this year—our big Easter service. Our Youth learn their responsibilities and take them seriously. We also honor Julie and Steve Ross, who faithfully and creatively shepherd our Youth each Sunday. To see our Youth serving and asking honest questions and laughing together week after week is to see faith formation happening right in front of us. That's a powerful and wonderful thing to see—one of the best!

We do need the nurture and support—and challenge—of a faith community for our own faith to grow and develop. Does the community agree on everything? No. Does the community all believe—commit—in the same way? No. What we do is help each other recognize the risen Christ in our midst. The risen Christ who comes in, past the doors we have locked, who walks right into the joys and the devastation of our lives, stronger than the fear that keeps us inside. The risen Christ who brings a living hope that we don't keep for ourselves but share with others.

Jesus comes and stands among us, and says,

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

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