

The Rev. John A. Runkle
May 1, 2011
Second Sunday of Easter, Year A
John 20:19-31

Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

I don't know about you, but I find Jesus' statement troubling. Troubling because here we have Thomas, a person not unlike you and me – a disciple, yes, but a skeptic – someone who was raised to see the world with suspicious eyes. Who was taught that only a fool believes everything he or she hears. Who learned that fiction often gets more traction than fact when people talk. Who subscribes to the creed that truly, "seeing is believing." So, Thomas simply is not about to accept the notion that Jesus was raised from the dead, just because other people are telling him so. How ridiculous would that be?! He demands to see some hard evidence, some real flesh-and-blood proof that Jesus really is alive, before giving any serious credence to such a notion. And who among us can blame him for that?

In fact, I suggest we celebrate Thomas as a wise and prudent man. Perhaps a patron saint for those of us who live in the present age – a world governed by fact, by logic and law, by measured, verifiable circumstance. After all, the principles of rational thinking form the very foundation for western civilization. Our own *Declaration of Independence* appeals to such principles when it proclaims, "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." You and I want, we expect our lives to be rational, predictable, and comprehensible. We don't like it when mystery creeps in, when we can't explain things, when events happen outside of the ordinary. For us to jump to conclusions, to agree to hearsay, to willingly accept the supernatural, without any clear facts, is, well, just plain ignorant! It's foolish! Yet, isn't this what Jesus is encouraging you and me to do?

Listen to the words again, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In the early twentieth century, Max Weber, a German sociologist, wrote an influential essay entitled, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In it, Weber argued a shift was taking place within Western culture – Protestantism

was working diligently to disentangle itself from the medieval mindset of the Christian sacrament. In other words, Protestants felt that a sacramental view of the world – a view that believes God transforms material objects into spiritual matter and then uses this matter to transmit divine grace to humankind – that such notions smacked of magic and the occult, and should be dismissed as superstition. In its place, Weber contended, was a growing and pervasive sense of rational thinking that extended into all areas of western life and thought. It seemed as though the motto, “out with superstition and in with logic,” was being raised by every voice. The result, Weber concluded, was religion was forced into a state of retreat. Notions of the mysterious and miraculous were dismissed. As such, any associations between the communion bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ were sneered at. “No logical evidence exists to substantiate such a claim. It’s nothing more than silly hocus-pocus. So, forget about it!”

Yet, with all this being said, Weber, himself having no religious belief, seemed to make his argument with a pessimistic voice. In fact, he described this movement as “the disenchantment of the world,” as though some spark of energy, some shining light was going out, some stirring quality of life now was missing from the human spirit. And as a consequence, he talked of human beings as though we now are confined, as it were, in “an iron cage.”¹ A bleak, barren and suffocating image, to be sure!

In the present day, David Brown, an Anglican priest and professor of theology at the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland, picks up this conversation. In his recent book, *God and Enchantment of Place*, Brown criticizes the present church – saying it has become a place where function replaces mystery.² Where the purpose of worship is more about encouraging people to busy work than it is about the adoration of God, and basking in the presence of God.³ That we are more focused on our busy work, doing logical tasks that seemingly justify our sense of salvation, rather than sitting at the feet of Jesus, participating in the presence of God, receiving the love of God’s spirit and offering our love in return.

Brown also extends his criticism to life beyond the walls of the church. He argues that at one time, in the not-so-distant past, it was inconceivable for people to think that God and religion were irrelevant to their lives. Yet now, such matters are thought of more like options to our daily regimen, like just one more competing leisurely activity that we may add to our daily calendars, – if we find

the time.⁴ At one point in our history, it was believed that the purpose of human existence was to know God intimately, to recognize God's presence throughout our day, to live our life with the knowledge and love of God. But for many today, they ask, "Where's the proof? And without proof, what's the point?" The tangible evidence in the world around us suggests a distant, disinterested God, if one even exists. Conventional wisdom suggests belief in the supernatural is for the weak, the simple-minded, the under-privileged.....

But Mr. Brown does not leave us to wallow in such disparaging thoughts. No, he suggests this state exists primarily because of our own doing. It results from our insistence that the logical mind is the most important organ in the body. And while survival would be difficult without it, we seem to forget the role the heart has to play. For the heart too is critical for our survival – but more than survival, it is critical, it is essential for you and me to live a meaningful and worthwhile life.

For example, how do we logically explain "love?" Well, we can't, but we know it exists. We know because our heart tells us it is so.

And how can we witness the glorious resurrection of spring each year and then rationalize the existence of God? We can't, but many of us look beyond the cherry blossoms, the dogwoods and azaleas, and find it impossible not to believe. Again, our heart tells us it is so.

Perhaps, this is the point Jesus makes with Thomas today. Perhaps, he is saying, "Have you come to believe in the love of God because your logical mind permits you to? If so, that's fine. But do not rely entirely on your intellect. Use also your heart to guide belief. For peace and contentment will be yours when you listen to your heart and place your trust in God."

You see Jesus is not asking us to be idiots, nor does he want us to live an extremely, analytical life locked in an "iron cage." Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ reveals to us an attentive, a loving and merciful God. And the Risen Lord desires nothing more than to engage our heart, as well as our mind, in a meaningful and sustained relationship.

In a few moments, we will be invited to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion – the bread and wine, representing the fruit of our labors, offered to

God in thanksgiving for the blessings of life. In return, we believe God transforms these elements into the body and blood of Christ, holy food and drink that will sustain, enliven and amend our spirit for our ongoing life in the world. It is a mutual exchange of love.

Now, if you look for tangible evidence that the bread and wine actually become Christ's body and blood, you may be disappointed (the truth be told, you may have more trouble imagining the wafer you receive is actually bread!) But nevertheless, we are invited to join in this celebration of love and thanksgiving by engaging our heart rather than our mind.

Just as Christ reached out to Thomas in an expression of divine love and generosity, Christ reaches out to you and me. Through these tangible objects, the bread and wine, God extends to us the grace to enable our fruitful lives. By these means, our heart knows that God indeed is present in our midst and we are participating in this divine presence. And as a result, we are free – free from the bondage of sin, free from the limitation of a stifled life, free from the imprisonment of an “iron cage.”

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¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin, 1984) 181.

²David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 19.

³ Brown, 20.

⁴ Brown, 9.