

Carol M. Strickland  
First Presbyterian Church of Athens  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2022  
Text: John 20

## Five Doors to Faith

In the Narrative Lectionary we have been following, we have been reading the Gospel of John since Christmas. Today is our last Sunday with John. I hope you've enjoyed this gospel. My appreciation for John has gone up 100%. I sort of think of him now as a first-century C. S. Lewis or J. K. Rowling, a great creative mind with marvelous literary sensibilities who conveys truth through engaging narrative.

Today we'll consider the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter, though if you want extra credit, you can go home and read chapter 21. We heard part of chapter 20 last Sunday, but today we'll hear it in its entirety. It is the Easter story as John tells it.

In the Gospel of John, we get the Easter story in five scenes. In each of them, someone comes to believe in the risen Christ. In the Gospel of John, "to believe" is not just some sort of abstract understanding. It's not an intellectual assent to a doctrine. Rather, "to believe" is to live in a particular way, i.e. to participate in a new way of life and to live in the unending presence of God. People come to belief in different ways. They come to resurrection faith through different doors. In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, we see five different ways it might happen, five different doorways through which people might enter. To illustrate this, I have asked our liturgist, Elder Beverly Phares, to stand near each of our five doors into our sanctuary as she reads. We will take the scenes one by one. So now, listen for God's Word as it comes to us in John, chapter 20.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

In this first scene, we have Mary Magdalene making a visit to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning, while it was still dark. But she discovered the stone had been moved and the grave empty. So, she ran and found Peter and a disciple that the text does not name. It simply calls him "the one whom Jesus loved." Peter and this disciple whom Jesus loved then raced to the tomb to witness what Mary Magdalene had reported to them. There's an interesting little

footnote here. The unnamed disciple outran Peter. This unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved has often been presumed to be John. The Johannine community that first treasured this gospel might have chuckled at this detail. Perhaps it reflected a little ecclesial rivalry between their community and the community that grew up around Peter. When Peter caught up with the beloved disciple at the tomb, he (Peter) went in and saw. He saw no body, just grave clothes. However, when the beloved disciple went in, the text says he not only saw but *believed*. The beloved disciple looked in and beheld an empty tomb. He saw nothing but believed everything. Some people are like that. From the beginning they believe. Instinctually, intuitively they believe. They have never known a day when they did not believe. Some people come through this door to faith, but not everyone.

*\*\*\* musical interlude \*\*\**

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

In this second scene, Mary has returned to the tomb distraught. Angels ask why she is weeping, and she tells them that her Lord, meaning Jesus' corpse, has been taken away but she doesn't know where. Then she has an encounter with the risen Jesus but doesn't know that's who it is. She mistakes him for the gardener. "If you, Sir, have taken his body away, please tell me where it is." At this point, the risen Jesus calls her by name. "Mary!" he says. She recognizes him and in short order announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" Mary Magdalene has been called the "apostle to the apostles" because she is the first witness of the resurrected Jesus. Some people come to faith like Mary when their name gets spoken. Perhaps during a time of loss and confusion they have a deeply personal experience of Christ's presence. Did you notice that *twice* the text said Mary turned around to see Jesus and speak to him? Some people have dramatic turns in their lives. When the Easter proclamation touches them in a distinct and powerful and personal way, they believe. This is the door through which some come, but not everyone.

*\*\*\* musical interlude \*\*\**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This third scene is interesting. It narrates the experience of the disciples who are behind locked doors with the risen Jesus. John doesn't specify that they were The Twelve (or, rather Eleven), so we assume that it's a more inclusive group. What's interesting is that while it's telling the story of some people who joyously witnessed the risen Jesus on Easter night, it's also describing the church. The first readers of John's gospel would have realized this immediately. It was the custom of the early church to gather on Sunday evening, after people got off work, on the first day of the week for worship (as opposed to worshipping on Saturday, the Jewish sabbath). The greeting that Jesus gives, "Peace be with you," is what they were accustomed to hearing at the beginning of worship. The showing of Jesus' wounds, "This is my body," echoes their experience of the Lord's Supper. Jesus breathing on them is the same as priests did on the newly baptized. Then there is a charge and a benediction. Empowered by his spirit and blessed with his peace, Jesus sends the disciples out into the world in mission. In this scene we get the church at worship and work. Some people come to belief through the door of ordinary worship and work of a congregation. Attending Sunday services, singing in the choir, participating in Sunday school, volunteering with projects, going on a mission trip, verily, serving on a committee: some people come to belief through the church's ongoing mission and ministry. But not everyone.

*\*\*\* musical interlude \*\*\**

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

In this fourth scene we learn that Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. They had experienced the risen Lord firsthand, but he had not. Thomas needed to see and touch the actual wounds in order to believe. Maybe he was from Missouri. Missouri, you know, is the show-me state. Or maybe Thomas represented an early sort of gnostic faith that was highly spiritual and needed grounding in a more incarnational understanding. Or maybe Thomas just needed some extra encouragement for his bravery. He's saddled with the moniker "Doubting Thomas," but I think "Brave Thomas" is more fitting. He was brave. When Jesus decided to return to Galilee back when the Jewish authorities were plotting to arrest him, Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."<sup>1</sup> And on their last night

together when Jesus told them he was going away and they knew the place where he was going, Thomas was willing to say what everyone else was thinking, but afraid to ask. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”<sup>ii</sup> In our text at hand we learn that he was not afraid to demand the same experience of the risen Jesus that his colleagues had had.

In any event, the risen Lord provided what Thomas needed. Jesus appeared and said to him, “Poke your finger here; look at my hands. Stick your hand in my side.” The risen Jesus presented himself to Thomas in the way that Thomas needed him to present himself. Some people come through the doorway into faith as a response to an answered prayer, as a response to God providing for them, as a response to experiencing the reality of God in the way that they need to experience it. But not everyone.

*\*\*\* musical interlude \*\*\**

Jesus said to [Thomas], “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Now we come to the final doorway. Beverly read this passage from the center double doors into the sanctuary. They are, you could say, the main doors through which we all come. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” That’s all of us. That’s everyone who was not a first-century, literal eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus but who follows him anyway. That’s everyone who has ever called themselves a Christian. In the end, the doorway into faith is always through believing, not seeing.

You ultimately can’t prove that God exists or that Jesus rose from the dead. It’s a leap, a leap through a doorway—maybe through the back of an old wardrobe, or through a brick portal at Platform 9 ¾, or just through the beautiful wooden doors at 185 East Hancock Avenue. It’s a leap through a doorway into life--new life--in his name.

You are blessed if you can find yourselves however eagerly, however timidly, however awkwardly, however joyfully on this side of the door. You are blessed. He is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

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<sup>i</sup> John 11:16

<sup>ii</sup> John 14:5