

Belief – John 20:19-31

Rev. Matt Nieman

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“On a scale of 1 to 10, how faithful would you say you are, in terms of religion? If you were a Supreme Court nominee and this question were posed to you in public by a senator, as it was to Ketanji Brown Jackson last month, how would you answer?”

As pointed out in an opinion piece in the *Christian Century* this week, “In American civil religion, it is good to be faithful, but not too faithful. It is good to have religion, but not to have any specific beliefs that might get in the way of your ability to make good judgments (as if religious belief gets in the way of that). Belief is the answer to everything and has purpose for nothing (in American civil religion). It is fundamentally necessary and, at the same time, untrustworthy.

“In the theater in which civil religion is performed, some people probe others in an attempt to reveal if there is anything unusual about their religion. It can feel like theater of the absurd.

“‘Do you believe?’ *Yes.*

“‘Do you believe anything in particular?’ *No.*

“‘Does belief make a difference in your life or work?’ *Certainly not.*

“‘How important is your purported faith to you?’ *Very important, indeed.*

“This performance—repeated most recently in the Supreme Court confirmation hearings for both Jackson and Amy Coney Barrett—rests on two competing impulses in American life,” quotes the *Century*. “One impulse is to have all our public figures be human. We like to praise people for their backgrounds and hear them credit God and their parents for how far they’ve come. Religion can be an important and compelling part of this story.

“But an even older counter impulse, one that’s rooted in 19th-century American Protestantism, is central to our public life: religion belongs in the private realm. When the specificity of people’s inner lives touches the blank slate that we imagine as the public sphere, religion should disappear

except in platitude. Motivations based on specific beliefs are deeply suspect, because religious belief in public life is inherently suspicious.”

When Jesus confronts Thomas and says to him, “Do not doubt, but believe,” one wonders to what degree Jesus wanted Thomas to demonstrate a public belief in him that would be different from what he held in private. It’s doubtful (no pun intended) that Jesus would encourage him to a public posture of faith that was measurably different than what he expressed in the solitude of his own home.

Surely Jesus would think that what Thomas believed should inform both his private and public actions.

When we think of what our faith means to us (what it is that we believe about God and to what extent), we would all hope that it would influence our actions in all facets of our lives—personal and professional. It should, and we can’t imagine Jesus wanting it any other way.

Every year, on the first Sunday after Easter Sunday, we hear the same story of Thomas being reluctant to buy what Jesus is selling—that he is alive again after being excruciatingly killed on a cross and buried in a tomb. We tend to ridicule him a bit for not trusting without first seeing the proof.

But really, who could blame him? Shouldn’t something so profound—a belief that God was put to death and then raised from the dead—be affirmed with certifiable evidence? After all, if we’re going to claim this belief as that which centers us and is the greatest influence on how we think, feel, and live our lives in the world, shouldn’t we be absolutely certain of it?

The question for Thomas and all of us, though, is do we literally need to see the nail marks in his hands and his pierced side to believe in the resurrected Christ? Will we have needed to be physically present with the disciples in that first appearance in that house for us to confess, “My Lord and my God”?

Jesus later said to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.”

Yes, blessed was anybody who was not in the presence of Jesus immediately after his resurrection but who still believes that he is alive.

But that doesn't mean we can't require some indirect proof that that tomb has not held him. That doesn't mean that we can't use the evidence we see of the divine all around us to daily ratify our belief that God is not dead but alive.

And each of us finds our proof uniquely. Yours is different from mine. Mine is different from yours. Sometimes our proofs overlap; sometimes they don't.

Here is some recent evidence that helps me to believe in the resurrected Christ, that Christ is alive:

I think back to just yesterday, and the event that occurred right where we are standing and sitting: the Posies for the Pantry sale. Several elements came together to offer me proof that Christ is alive. First, there was the beautiful weather. Second, and more importantly, was the diligence of the volunteers to pull off such a successful sale. Third was the willingness of vendors to provide their wares for sale and give some of the proceeds to the food pantry. And fourth was the willingness of shoppers to come and buy more plants, flowers, and birdhouses than they would normally buy had the sale not been a benefit for a worthy cause.

All these elements came together for the purpose of helping somebody in need, the hungry in our community. To me, that's proof of the presence of the divine.

I've also been on the receiving end of gestures, prayers, and goodwill over these last many months. And I can't tell you how much it has erased any doubt I might have otherwise had that the risen Christ is present. When people rally around others who are going through crisis or otherwise tough times, it leaves one propped up and reassured that they are not forgotten. It leaves one believing that new life is not only possible but probable and inevitable.

And in these moments where we see our own unique proof of God's presence, we look to the heavens and proclaim like the disciples did: "My Lord and my God."

We have belief when this is the proof we see. We then believe that Jesus is alive. And we are then more able to trust Christ every day.

John G. Paton (1824-1907) was one of the great missionaries to the South Sea Islanders. In translating the Scriptures into the native language of these islanders, he could find no word for "believe." Since the concept of "belief" is so basic to the Christian faith, and to the New Testament, he could not finish his translation.

One day an exhausted islander came into his home, threw himself down in a chair, put his feet up on another chair, stretched out his body and sighed how great it felt to be able to lean his whole weight on those two chairs. Instantly Paton knew his quest for the right word had ended. For belief is at its most basic level "leaning our whole weight" on God, surrendering to God's strength, not ours. Belief is not an act of truth. It is an act of trust.

As we are talking about belief, though, we must not look past a reality from this story in John today that often gets lost as we either praise or put down Thomas for his belief or lack thereof. It's quite remarkable in this story that Jesus never ceases believing in the disciples, including Thomas.

If we think about the broad scope of the gospel narratives, we find example after example of the disciples failing to meet Jesus' expectations. They let him down often, especially in the last days of Jesus' life.

It's remarkable then that on this day *he* comes to *them* as they're locked behind closed doors out of fear that they will be the next ones to suffer. Jesus could've seen them as fragile, spineless, and, frankly, as deserters of their faith. Yet, he makes multiple appearances at this house in his quest for them to believe in him. He believes in them despite their faults. And he never gives up on them.

A guy named Carl Rife, in a piece of writing titled, "What Does It Mean to Believe?" wrote this:

"To say I believe in God is possible because God first of all says, "I believe in you." All through my life I have been lifted beyond my self-imposed limits by persons who have believed in me. I remember vividly the difficult struggle I had when I first started college. I thought I was going to flunk out. I received a 66 or a D on a religion test for which I had studied hard and for which I had tutored other students. It was my first

test in college, and I thought I had prepared well, as well as anyone could for a test. I reasoned that if I had put so much work into one subject and almost didn't make it, how was I going to fare in my other classes which were much more difficult - such as freshman English, philosophy and biology with premed students? And so I went to talk with my advisor and shared my real fears with him. And in the midst of our talking together, he let me know one important thing above all - that he believed in me. And because he believed in me, I was able to face my personal crisis victoriously. His belief in me challenged and empowered me to do my best - both in college and in the years to come. And that experience has happened to me again and again.

“Now let me tell you that in much the same way, God believes in each one of us. When you get right down to it and you really think about it, we gather for worship to be reminded in Scripture, in song, in sermon, in sacrament that God believes in each of us. And then, in turn, to respond that we believe in God. And this interchange becomes a sealing and strengthening of a relationship.”

There are so many people who believe in us when we don't believe in ourselves or in anything else. And the same is true for the resurrected Christ. He comes to us—we who cower in fear behind our own locked doors at times—and says to us, “Peace be with you.” Over and over again, we find that he believes in us.

All the more reason to work toward placing more of our trust in the one who would not be restrained by the power of death. He lives today for you and for me. He comes to us so that we too might live. Believe it.