

**April 11, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service****TEXT:** [John 20:19–31](#)**TITLE:** **Believing the Unseen***By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

Full disclosure, I did not want to preach from this scripture passage today. It is too obvious and expected. Last Sunday, we celebrated Resurrection or Easter Sunday, and this week to preach about Jesus' appearances to the disciples, and Thomas seems too familiar, too anticipated. As I studied and prepared to preach the lectionary passage from Acts, the spirit of God kept pulling my attention back to this text from John, challenging and encouraging me to see it from a new perspective.

If we were not ever able to relate to the disciples' behavior after the resurrection of Jesus Christ before, we can certainly relate now. The writer of the Gospel of John states that on the evening of the first day of the week, the disciples were locked in a room out of fear. We have first-hand experience and knowledge of being locked in, fearful of being in contact with people outside of our immediate household, fearful of touching contaminated surfaces, fearful of the possibility of beathing in particles lingering in the air and infused with the Coronavirus, fearful that contracting Coronavirus may have devastating consequences—prolonged illness, protracted hospitalization, and even death.

If we are completely honest, we fear that which we cannot see—the life giving and sustaining air, the breath of life. Every day until recently, we were reminded of the number of people who were infected with or who have died from contracting Covid-19. And we were regularly reminded of the unimaginable numbers of unemployed people, without resources to pay their bills, secure food, medication, and other life necessities. Like the disciples on that resurrection evening, we are secluded and fearfully hunkered down in our respective homes.

We might question why the disciples were fearful of the Jews, as there was evidence that Jesus had risen from the dead, as he said he would. Upon discovery of the empty tomb where Jesus had been laid, Mary Magdalene encountered Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, and she told them that Jesus' body was not in the tomb. When the two disciples arrived at the tomb, they found it empty except for the linen cloths that had covered Jesus' body and head. Perhaps their lack of understanding about the empty tomb fueled the disciples' fear.

As the two disciples fled the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene stayed behind, seeking answers as to where Jesus' body had been taken. According to John's gospel, she encountered two angels, standing at the foot and head of where Jesus' body had been laid. And turning, Mary Magdalene encountered someone she presumed to be a gardener and inquired about the location of Jesus' body. When the presumed gardener called her by name, Mary immediately realized it was her teacher, Jesus who had risen from the dead. Jesus instructs her to go tell his brothers the disciples that "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God." Mary ran and told the

disciples—"I have seen the Lord!" and she obediently told them everything that Jesus the Christ had said.

Now in the vernacular of south slang—for some reason, the disciples did not believe that "fat meat is greasy." In other words, they did not believe the testimony of Mary Magdalene when she professed that she had seen the Lord. For if they had, why were they still fearful of the Jews? Jesus had told them do not fear people who can kill the body (Matt 10:28a). However, that is easier said than done. We all know the drill, stay home unless absolutely necessary to go out, maintain at least a distance of six feet from others when in public, always wear your masks—double mask if possible—wash your hands continuously. And yet there are people who still refuse to believe that these simple tasks will keep them healthy.

As Christians we know that everyone is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, yet we sometimes find ourselves divided as us and them. We know that in Christ Jesus there is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, male, and female—yet skin color, gender and gender identity, economics, education, and even where we live often define our quality of life and determines how we are judged by systems, institutions and people who are not members of our affinity group. Jesus and his followers challenged the religious and political systems of their day; they included women in their inner circle, they ate and communicated with marginalized, and people deemed as untouchables, they worked on the Sabbath, and they defied unjust laws and institutions. And now the disciples were hidden and locked away in fear and the risen Jesus appears in their midst.

Commentator Clayton Schmidt states, "The human mind searches for order: to make sense of things, to understand the world, to organize all the data that comes to our awareness. We possess the keen desire to follow the evidence until a mystery is solved." Mary Magdalene told the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, and yet they did not believe until the risen Christ showed up in their confusion and despair, twice declaring "Peace be with you," showing them his hands and his side as evidence that he had indeed been crucified, and then commissioning them, saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

I am a witness that Jesus shows up in the midst of our turmoil and fear, as well. Jesus shows up and assures us that though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall not fear for God is with us. God is with us during sickness and disease. God is with us in times of economic instability. God is with us in the midst of dangerous and perilous situations. God is with us even though we cannot see God, we have the assurance that the spirit of God is there. For just as Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them "receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus breathes new life into the dead and dying, dreadful, and destructive situations in our personal and collective lives as well.

Scripture tells us that Thomas was missing from the gathering the evening of Jesus' resurrection, he was not locked in the room with the others when Jesus appears. Typically, this is where sermons will take a turn and begin to demonize Thomas for

being absent that evening and then to denigrate him for demanding a sign, if he is to believe the other disciples' testimony, "We have seen the Lord." However, the other disciples did not believe the testimony of Mary Magdalene when she declared the same. They did not believe until Jesus showed up in the locked room and showed them his hands and side as well. Their faith had not reached the level of believing the unseen.

Now, if I were to take a side trip in this sermon, I might speculate as to why Thomas was not in the room with this brothers and sisters that evening, for as Pastor Randy read from Psalm 133, "how good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity." However, Thomas may have been dwelling with siblings and kindred in the village consoling, comforting, encouraging, feeding, and healing. By serving those left outside the perceived protection of the locked room, going into and among the people were suffering, alone, discouraged, grieving the death of their Lord and savior, Thomas may have been exercising his faith.

Commentator Schmidt states that "Faith is a mystery of the heart that the mind wants to solve. To admit that we believe certain things on faith is to say that we are willing, in limited circumstances, for things not to make sense. We want faith to be shored up by certain evidence, so that the leap of faith is manageable." The Gospel of John provides a clear message that helps us see the truth, so that we will know with certainty that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead, that he has ascended to his Father and our God, and that he shows up in places where he is least expected, breathing new life into situations, circumstances, conditions and relationships that we perceive to be dead or dying, and Jesus breathes new life into us and commands us to go.

Go share the good news that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead and is dwelling with, leading, guiding, consoling, empowering, and walking with us yet now. To go and breathe new life into dying situations, dead relationships, hopelessness, and people who are about to give up. Jesus breathes new life into us and commands us to go and provide for the least of these, people who are marginalized or demonized, the unaccompanied children and people crossing the border seeking asylum and safety; to provide for people without food, clean water, affordable healthcare and housing. To go and comfort people who have experienced abuse and violence; to comfort and stand with communities and people after yet another senseless individual or mass murder be it by the those in authority or those who use guns to destroy. To go and demand sensible gun laws, equitable housing, access to food and drinkable water, to minister to incarcerated citizens, and to hold elected officials accountable.

Beloved, we have not seen our incarnate Lord and savior in the flesh and yet we believe because of the testimony of those who walked with him. We believe because we have the written accounts of his many signs and wonders, his miracles of healing, feeding, challenging systems and structures; of him dying on the cross and God resurrecting him on the third day. We believe because Jesus sent the comforter to dwell with and within us and to lead and guide us. And we believe because we have witnessed the risen Christ show up in the midst of our messes, sin and transgressions, illness, death, and loss. We believe, because we have mustard seed faith that even when we do not

believe, when our faith is wavering, and we have literally or figuratively shut ourselves up in rooms of fear, despair, and desperation, the risen Christ shows up lovingly declaring, "Peace be with you.

The author of the Gospel of John declares, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," not to throw shade at Thomas, but to encourage us by faith to believe the unseen and believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in our Lord and our God, we may have the blessing of evermore. May the peace of God be with us all as we strive to believe the unseen.

Amen.