

“OUR YES TO GOD’S YES”

John 20:19-29

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Westminster Presbyterian Church

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I have always resisted the custom of referring to Thomas as “doubting Thomas.” I feel like it’s wrong to stick him with this label when he is only doing what every reasonable person would do under the circumstances. He says, “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.”

Does it make Thomas a skeptic because he refuses to believe that a dead man is alive again on the basis of the witness of his fellow disciples who have spent the last few days in grief and fear? Wouldn’t you want more evidence?

There are some church leaders who accuse churches of lacking faith because they won’t gather together on Sunday mornings, because these churches don’t trust God to keep them safe. Are we skeptics because we wear our masks at the grocery store, wash our hands before we go out and when we come home? Are we doubting God’s power because we shelter at home and practice social distancing?

Are we skeptics because we don’t believe those who claim that God is punishing the world through the coronavirus? I don’t believe God judges the world by causing bad things to happen. I don’t doubt that God loves the world, but there are some things about which I am cynical. In fact I believe we live in a very skeptical world, that we are just like Thomas in believing that the dead do not come back to life.

It is hard to believe, for example, that enough people will take action to heal the earth before its destruction becomes inevitable. Many, in fact, believe that we are already beyond that point. It is hard to believe that the voting public will ever have more influence on legislatures than the moneyed interests of large corporations. It is hard to believe that we will ever see an end to the violence and hate stemming from racism. It is hard to believe that the wounds people have inflicted on the world can be healed. It is quite reasonable, in fact, to believe that they cannot be healed. That’s where Thomas was. That’s where we are.

But then Jesus shows up and says, “Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” There are scars of course and we could focus on the scars, totally missing the point. The wounds are real... but not enduring. The death of Jesus is not God’s last word. Jesus has always been about the life... before and after the cross. “Look Thomas! See the flesh, warm to the touch, alive. Feel the breath of Jesus and receive the life of the Spirit.

Sadly, the church has sometimes gotten stuck in the Jesus who died for my sins. We have become fascinated with our own forgiveness and failed to see God’s purposes. Give

thanks, yes, that God's love is stronger than our weakness... but understand that forgiveness moves us into a new life, away from doubt and into faith.

Thomas' response may be my favorite words in scripture. I hear in his words a changed life, a changed disposition, a movement from deep sorrow to faith, a movement away from his own self to the love of God. He says, "My Lord and my God!" These words tell us from where Thomas intends to take direction. He will listen to the voice of his Lord. He will see the world through the eyes of God and not his despair. These words are his "yes" to Jesus.

His "yes" to the resurrection of Jesus is a "yes" to his own resurrection. Easter is not just about the resurrection of Jesus, but about our new life as well. Easter's fundamental question asks us what we will say "yes" to.

In this Earth Day week, the "yes" in e.e. cummings poem seems especially appropriate. It's worth hearing those lines again:

"i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today....)

Despite the snow of this past week, I've found my spirit lifted by the signs of earth coming to life. To see the resurrection of trees and shrubs with an onslaught of color awakens the human spirit as well. The vibrant yellows of the cornelian cherry and forsythia, and the reds of the maple, rosebud, and crab apple trees evoke a "yes" that has been lying dormant through the winter. The earth itself is trying to make believers of us. In the earth's resurrection we can see our own, as the song we'll sing at the end of the service:

*In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*
(From *In the Bulb There is a Flower*)

We have been saying "no" for far too long. We have been saying "no" to the health of the earth because we valued consumption of resources and the desire for maximum profit over the life of the world around us. We have said "no" to our neighbors as they flee war and famine in their own lands and look for safer lodging. In our efforts to get ahead and be "the best," we have too often said "no" to the community that celebrates differences and values compassion.

It is Easter, the season of resurrection and new life. It may be difficult to see our way to the necessary "yes" of Easter in a time when the death toll is rising, unemployment rising and the economy struggling, but it is not impossible. The signs of resurrection are there for those who have eyes to see.

Brian McLaren offers wonderful insight into these positive signs of new life. He writes in *The Great Spiritual Migration*:

“There is so much right with Christianity... ministers prepare sermons into which they pour their hearts.... Faithful people... generously show kindness to one another.... Hospitality abounds. Mission flows. People give money... and the good news is spread in word and deed.” And we might add that even in these trying times, the church is finding new ways to be together, new ways to worship and hear the good news, and new ways to serve those in need” (p. 179).

But McLaren doesn't stop there. He goes on to say:

“There is so much right with the world. The sun faithfully does its work, bathing us in life-sustaining energy. The moon faithfully does its work, lifting tides and letting them fall, and no one worries it will fail.. Water faithfully does its work, the lifeblood of our planet, circulating from cloud to rain to stream to river to sea to cloud. Creatures do their work as well, filling the earth with life and song, sharing the gift of life through death and birth, through nesting and migration, through pollination and germination, each specimen a living miracle if we have eyes to see” (p. 179)

These are things we can see, if only we would pause from the busyness and demands of our lives. It is harder to overlook the flaws in people and the harm that we've done to others and to the earth, but McLaren helps us here as well.

“There is so much right in humanity. Children play. Adolescents fall in love. Lovers entangle their limbs, breath, and dreams. Babies are conceived and born and nurtured, through their smiles and cries teaching their parents to love in ways they never knew they were capable of. Friends laugh, plan adventures, throw parties, stick together, weep at the graveside after a lifetime of shared joy. Farmers grow, harvesters pick, transporters transport, grocers distribute, and meals of unimaginable variety and delight are prepared and eaten.... Researchers seek cures, discoveries, solutions, understanding. Teachers teach and children catch the gift of curiosity.... Grandparents and elders watch all this, their eyes brimming with tears of joy” (pp. 179-180)

Easter is so much more than an empty tomb and transformed disciples, even more than a resurrected Jesus. Easter is God's “yes” to you calling forth your “yes” to God and the world. The new life that God brings forth is all around us.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe.” It is certainly true that we find it difficult to believe that the dead can rise to new life. It is true that we cannot put our hands into Jesus' side and touch the wounds from the nails in his hands. But we do see the dead raised to new life all the time. There is a great deal of evidence that should move us to say “yes” to God and “yes” to one another. May God grant us eyes to see, ears to hear, and feet to walk into the new life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

McLaren, Brian D. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way To Be Christian*. Convergent Books: New York, NY. 2016.