

“Missing Easter”
John 20:19-31
2nd Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville
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One night in 1963,
a research psychologist named Bob Rosenthal
snuck into his lab
and hung signs on all of the rat cages in the lab.

Some signs labeled particular rats as incredibly smart (“Maze Bright”),
while other signs attached to other cages labeled those rats as incredibly dumb
(“Maze Dull”).

Of course, neither of these labels were true.
They were all just rats.
Run-of-the-mill, basic rats.

The next morning, Bob brought in a group of fresh student researchers and
assigned a rat to each of them. Over the next few weeks, their job was to run their
assigned rat through a maze and record how well it did. And before they started,
the researchers were told that some of these rats were exceptional, while others
lagged way behind.

So, they ran the rats through the mazes.
And the results were not even close!

The “Maze Bright” rats did twice as well as the “Maze Dull” rats...even
though the “Maze Bright” rats were not bright and the “Maze Dull” rats were not
dumb.

At the time, it was an astonishing experiment!

When the researchers thought the rats were really smart, they felt more
warmly towards the rats and touched them more carefully...and this subtle change
of heart had an influence on the rat!¹

¹ Many different stories can be found on the Internet about Dr. Robert Rosenthal’s experiment. For example, see <https://sites.google.com/site/7arosenthal/>. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for originally drawing my attention to this story.

So the rats that were treated like smart rats performed better.
All because someone had a picture in their mind before they interacted with the rat.

All because someone else had **labeled** those rats...

I tell that story for two reasons this morning.

The first is that I'd like you to put the story in your back pocket so that you can pull it out later...can you do that? Just remember the story about the rats when I ask you to pull it out later.

The other reason I tell that story is that there is a disciple in our text for this morning who has most definitely HAS A LABEL.

It's Thomas, right?
"Doubting" Thomas.

Now...unlike the rats, this is not a FALSE label. It's certainly true that Thomas had his doubts about Easter, and quite frankly, those doubts have proven to be an immense comfort to many a Christian through the years...because Thomas doubted, it's also ok for us to have our doubts...

But I think there's something that we miss when we attach that label to this story, and only see our text as a story that tells us it's ok to doubt.

You see, in my mind, Thomas is only ONE-FOURTH of the story.

The story we heard this morning is better described as SCENES THREE & FOUR in John's Easter story. If you start at the beginning of chapter 20 and make your way through the ENTIRE chapter, John has four vignettes.

Each one tells a DIFFERENT STORY about different disciples...
and how they come to believe in, to trust in,
to have faith in the God of Easter.²

² For this exegesis of the 20th chapter of John, I am indebted to a webinar by Thomas G. Long, sponsored by *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 2014.

Scene one takes place with our text from Easter Sunday. Peter and the beloved disciple are running to the tomb, the beloved disciple reaches the tomb first but does not enter.

Then Peter enters, and then verse 8:

“Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed...”

How did the beloved disciple come to faith?

WE DON'T REALLY KNOW.

The next verse says that neither he nor Peter understood the scripture...so it wasn't UNDERSTANDING that led to faith. And it's not an encounter with the risen Lord that gives him his faith.

He just sees the empty tomb...and believes.

It's almost an INTUITIVE kind of faith.

Scene TWO begins in verse 11 with Mary Magdalene.

If the beloved disciple came to faith by seeing and believing, Mary's experience is seeing...and NOT believing.

She sees the empty tomb...and assumes that Jesus' body was stolen.

Then she sees the risen Jesus himself...and assumes he is the gardener.

Only when she HEARS Jesus call her name: “Mary!”—

does she come to believe.

This isn't so much an intuitive faith experience as it is a very PERSONAL faith experience.

I'm reminded of how Martin Luther King, Jr. once described a crisis of faith in his own life. It occurred at the beginning the Montgomery bus boycott, when King was receiving 30-40 hate letters per day.

There were obscene phone calls, death threats, some of which not only targeted King but his wife and young daughter as well.

One call came late one night after a meeting, and it shook King deeply.

He got up, went into the kitchen, put on some coffee and decided to quit. He couldn't do it. He couldn't take it.

He said a prayer of desperation:

“Oh, Lord...I'm down here trying to do what is right. But, Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm afraid...I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can't face it alone,” King prayed.

And then, King says, he felt something—a presence, an inner voice, telling him:

“Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even unto the end of the world.”

King said it was the voice of Jesus, promising never to leave King alone.

He described that moment in his life as a pivotal moment.

“The idea of a personal God was no longer some ‘metaphysical category’...No, God was very close to [me] now, a living God who could transform ‘the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope’ and who would never, ever, leave [me] alone.”³

Do you know anything about that kind of experience?

If you've ever had that kind of experience, a very personal experience of God that has transformed YOUR despair into hope...well, THAT'S scene two in John's Easter, and it's what happens to Mary Magdalene when Jesus comes to her at the empty tomb.

All of which brings us to our text for today.
Who has faith in an Easter God at this point?

³ Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

First the beloved disciple, THEN Mary Magdalene...and that's it.
So how do Jesus' OTHER disciples come to trust in the God of Easter?
That's the story John is trying to tell.

Scene THREE looks like this:

It's Easter evening,
the disciples are huddled together in fear,
behind locked doors—
and Jesus appears!

This is not an intuitive experience.
And it's not a one-on-one personal experience.
It's a COMMUNAL experience of faith.

When Dorothy Day described her conversion to the Catholic Church, she wrote:

“I had heard many say that they wanted to worship God in their own way and did not need a Church....

But I did not agree to this...

“We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other...”⁴

The former Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells of the time he was invited to a small, rural church to baptize a 12-year-old boy. The pastor of that church had been instructing the boy in the faith, and Willimon said he was happy to get the invitation and accept the invitation...

but then the pastor had a second question:

“Jeremy very much wants to be immersed. Can you do that?”

⁴ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, as cited in *Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories*, edited by John M. Mulder, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

“Uh, sure,” Willimon replied, hesitant to admit that he had rarely baptized anyone by immersion.

So when he arrives at the church that Sunday morning, Jeremy is there on the front steps with his pastor.

“Jeremy, this is the bishop,” the pastor said proudly. “It’s an honor for you to be baptized by the bishop.”

Young Jeremy looked Willimon over and said, “They tell me you don’t do many of these. I’d feel better if we had a run-through beforehand.”

“That’s just what I was going to suggest,” Willimon said.
So they went into the church’s fellowship hall and they did a dry-run.

Jeremy said, “After you say the words, then you take my hand and lead me up these steps, and do you want me to take off my socks?”

Well...Willimon didn’t know the “correct” answer to that one, but he did know and experience a glorious service that Sunday.

Why was it glorious?

After the sermon and a baptismal anthem, the entire congregation went into the fellowship hall where the immersion tank was...and Willimon asked Jeremy if he had anything to say before his baptism.

“Yes, I do,” Jeremy replied.

“I just want to say to all of you that I’m here today because of you. When my parents got divorced, I thought my world was over. But you stood by me. You told me the stories about Jesus. And I just want to say to you today thanks for what you did for me. I intend to make you proud as I’m going to try to live my life the way Jesus wants.”

This speech, of course, left Willimon and a few others in tears.

So as Jeremy made his way up the steps to the tank, he saw the wetness in his bishop's eyes and he whispered to Willimon, "Are you going to be ok?"⁵

How many of you here today have ever had the experience of this church or another church BRINGING YOU TO TEARS?

The church sent you cards,
you were visited in the hospital by friends,
they brought food to your door...

According to our text for today, THAT'S SCENE THREE of John's description of EASTER.

It was in community, says John,
that many of Jesus' disciples came to faith,
to believe in their risen Lord.

But of course, community experiences are not PERFECT experiences.
Just ask Thomas.

Thomas went through everything that the other disciples went through—except EASTER. For whatever reason, when Jesus showed up on that first Easter evening...Thomas WAS NOT THERE!

Before we label Thomas "doubting Thomas," I wonder if he should simply be known as "absent at Easter" Thomas, or Thomas "who got the short end of the stick"...because Jesus showed up when he wasn't around.

Church Historian Martin Marty recalls a summer day when he was eight years old--when one of those GRAND MIRACLES of childhood occurred:

A watermelon truck overturned right in front of his house!

⁵ William H. Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2008.

The uninjured driver jumped out to watch hopelessly
 as SCORES of neighborhood children from everywhere
 RACED to the scene of that blessed event
 and DOVE into the spilled cargo
 for a sticky picnic on the pavement.

...Right in front of his house!

That was the GOOD news.
 The BAD news was that Martin Marty...was OUT OF TOWN that day,
 visiting his grandmother.

He missed it.
 He never saw the overturned truck,
 never took part in the sticky feast.

He only heard about it from his friends.

Some friends! They described every last succulent detail to Martin when he got
 back about how DELICIOUS that watermelon tasted.

Do you know what that's like?
 To hear about some wonder, some DELIGHT, wishing you had been there, but
 you MISSED IT?⁶

How unfair.
 How UNFAIR for all the other disciples to experience the joy of Easter on
 Easter evening, and Thomas wasn't there on Easter evening! Maybe HE was
 visiting his grandmother, who knows?

Which brings us to SCENE FOUR:
 A week later (verse 26), the disciples are together again...and Jesus appears
 to them again, and thank goodness—this time, Thomas is there!

And Thomas...who perhaps was a bit wounded at not being present the first
 time around...he sees Jesus' wounds...and he believes.

I love this scene NOT because Thomas' doubt disappears.

⁶ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story.

I love it because Thomas gets a second chance!
 Or maybe we should say a third chance...or a fourth chance, since this is scene number four.

Do you see what this means?

The GOD of John, chapter 20 is one of my all-time FAVORITE descriptions of God, because John's God is absolutely RELENTLESS.

God comes first to the beloved disciple through intuition,
 and then to Mary Magdalene by calling her name,
 and then to 10 of Jesus' disciples through community,
 and then to Thomas through woundedness,
offering another chance at Easter,
 because NOTHING will get in God's way...

God gives up on NO ONE.

And maybe there's a message for us in that.
 Maybe, just maybe...John's Easter message is **neither should we**.

We live in an age and a time when it is customary to be allowed to GIVE UP ON CERTAIN PEOPLE.

We write them off.
 And you know how we write them off?

We LABEL them.

We paint pictures in our minds of what we assume is going on:

In fact, let me toss out a few phrases, and just think about the image that comes into your mind, the assumptions that you make.

EVICTED FAMILY...what does that family look like in your mind's eye?

REFUGEE...what does that person look like to you?

TEENAGER STRUGGLING WITH IDENTITY issues...what does that young person look like in your mind's eye?

WEALTHY BUSINESSMAN...

INCARCERATED FELON...

CHILD IN FOSTER CARE...

It seems to me that there is only ONE label that's ever appropriate to stick on someone before we know a person. You know what that label is, right?

It's not "intelligent". It's not "dumb".

It's not "good". It's not "bad".

It's "child of God".

That's the only label that Christians get to use with other people.

Do you remember the story about the rats?

I want you to pull it out of your back pocket now.

In fact, I would like to conduct my own experiment with all of you.

No, I don't want you to be the rats.

I want you to be the researchers.

Here's the research I would like you to conduct.

Find someone who has had to handle more than their share of heartache: family separation, emotional deprivation, economic desperation—someone **who is ALWAYS gone when the watermelon truck of life arrives.**

Can you do that?

Then...after you to find that person,

I want you to drive right up to their street,

and I want you to turn your watermelon truck over.

Look, it doesn't have to be the actual street they live on...

just find that person who has received a raw deal in life.

And then spill your watermelon truck right in their midst.
Now here's the fun part:

You get to decide what's in that truck.
What are you going to spill?

Please, don't take watermelons.
Let me make some suggestions.

You could spill—
 GENEROSITY...

You could spill—
 HOSPITALITY...

You could spill—
 HOPE...

You could spill—
 FORGIVENESS...

You could spill—
 COMPASSION....

You could spill—
 LOVE...

It's up to you.

And maybe, just maybe...when you set out to spill your watermelon truck,
and you thought you were setting out to find someone and help someone, you just
might realize that in the finding and the spilling and the sharing...it is the God of
Easter—who ends up finding YOU!

The God of NEW LIFE who ends up helping you.

And you will be surprised...
and astonished...

And you will cry out with joy,
just like Thomas did long ago,
"My Lord and my God!"

Amen.