

Last week we considered one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the story about doubting Thomas, found in the gospel of John. It happened on the very first Easter night. The disciples had gathered together when Jesus appears among them. However, one of the disciples, Thomas, was not there. When the disciples later told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, Thomas would not believe it. He would not believe unless he saw Jesus, unless he touched Jesus. Ever since then Thomas has been known as Doubting Thomas. We too are doubters. We too may have our doubts about elements of the faith. Thomas' story encourages us by declaring that even in our doubts, we can have faith. Doubts are the ants in the pants that help us to grow in our faith, that keep our faith alive. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, certainty is. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but an element of it.

Today's post-resurrection account from Luke is related. In Luke's story, all the disciples are "disbelieving," when they see the risen Lord. In the story of Doubting Thomas story, only Thomas doubts, for the other disciples did see the risen Lord. However, in this story, the disciples are disbelieving, in spite of the fact that they see the risen Lord.

Again, the disciples are gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. They are trying to put their lives back together again. Their teacher, their leader had been arrested, mocked, and crucified. This teacher, with whom they had an intimate relationship for three years, was dead. The mission they were being trained is over. Like last week's passage, perhaps they were frightened that they may experience the same fate Jesus did. They are in the midst of a crisis. They are in the midst of despair, grief,

and fear. Wondering how they would go forward, Jesus all of a sudden appears among them.

The disciples freak out because they think they are seeing a ghost. Sensing what is going on, Jesus encourages them to come closer and to see the scars on his hands and feet. The wounds are still raw. He encourages them to touch him. Touch me so that you will see that I am not a ghost. Luke, the author, writes, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and wondering.” Their fear, their believing they are seeing a ghost, their disbelieving that this is Jesus, are all because dead people don’t rise. The dead don’t come back from the dead, unless you are a ghost!

What is interesting here is that no more mention is made of their disbelieving. Here is Jesus just having returned from the brutal, lonely, and eternal victorious journey from life to death and back. However, his executive team, his closest partners in ministry, the future leaders of the church, are freaking out and filled with disbelief. Notice that Jesus does not seem to be concerned about their disbelieving, in spite of the fact that they see him. Jesus says nothing about their disbelieving. In the Doubting Thomas story, Jesus seems to be disappointed that Thomas doubted. But here, Jesus makes no response to their disbelieving that he is alive!

Instead, Jesus says, “Let’s eat.” Well, not quite: “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him some broiled fish. It is important to point out that in that day, in that ancient society, to eat with someone was an expression of deep intimacy with someone. Eating together was more than just sharing food. It was sharing fellowship, sharing friendship. It was a deep expression that these are your friends. If you were the host, there was the expectation that you would care for your guests, and protect them. These

are your friends who belong to you and you belong to them. To eat with someone was a true act of belonging to this community.

It is after they eat that Jesus begins to open their minds to understand the Scripture. As the commentator points out, notice the pattern: first belong; then begin the process of behaving, figuring out what you believe, and growing in your faith, your beliefs. While opening the Scripture, studying it, teaching it, are vitally important, they come after the fear has been dispelled, belonging has been established, and a meal is shared. We belong to the family of God. As God's family, we eat this meal, the Lord's Supper. Granted, it may appear to be just a piece of bread and a sip of the fruit of the vine. As Chip Andrus describes it, Chiclets and shot glasses on a hub Cap. In our "Directory for Worship," which is a part of our *Book of Order*, the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, "When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God." In this sacrament, we are reminded that we belong, that we belong to God and to all of God's faithful. Also in the Directory for Worship, we read, "Even those who doubt may come to the table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ." Belong, then grow in belief. In other words, the Lord's Supper is a means through which we are assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ! It is a means by which we come to believe, a means by which we know we belong to God's faithful.

My college roommate of three years, Doug, went home with me to Iowa during one of our school breaks. He was almost a city slicker from New York and did not know much about rural life. While we were home, I decided to go see my Uncle Tom and Aunt

Margaret. Uncle Tom was quite a character and some of his antics are things I cannot describe from the pulpit. Anyway, I said, "Let's go to my Uncle Tom and Aunt Margaret's farm. She'll probably fix us something to eat." She had always said to stop by anytime. She might not have much, but she would have something to eat. My roommate thought it was very bold of me to show up unannounced, uninvited, especially before a mealtime and with a stranger. I should have said, "Jesus did it. Why can't I?" If I would not have visited while I was back home, they may have been offended. That was family. That was belonging. They enjoyed our stopping by. My uncle teased my friend enough to embarrass him. We had a modest, but good meal. We had a great time. We were family. We belonged. We ate together. Years after that, my uncle and aunt would ask about Doug, where was he, how was he doing, what about his family. When you share food with someone, you create a bond. In this sacrament, we create a bond with all of God's faithful.

It is belonging to God's family, to a family of faith, that we come to believe. We may come to the family disbelieving, like the disciples did, but Jesus does not shut us out anymore than he shut out the disciples in their disbelieving. Historically, it was believed that people first believe, then they belong. But this story seems to contradict that. Even when we may disbelieve, we belong to God and to God's family.

All authority and power and dominion
to the name that is above all names—
Jesus Christ our Lord—
now and in the age to come. **Amen.**