

“Unless...”

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 111

Reading from the Gospels: John 20:19-31

It’s a flaw, I have to confess; probably a thorn in my wife’s side, though she’s been a good sport about it; hasn’t excommunicated me ... yet. I’d see a therapist about it, but frankly, I’d rather not be cured. It’s onions ... can’t say I’m a fan. Minced and heavily cooked, I can survive, but raw or thickly cut ... or noticeable? Spare me, Lord, please! Of course, this all makes the challenge of ordering in a restaurant pure torture. *Delight in our world-famous, iconic chicken salad made with organically fed, free-range, college-educated chicken, marinated in a deliciously picante curried mustard and dill glaze, all hosted on a lightly toasted, locally sourced, ciabatta roll.* Okay ... but, does it...? If I ask the waitstaff, most of the time the answer is - *I’m not sure.* So, it’s really playing roulette with a Vidalia, isn’t it. I’ll have the club sandwich. Thanks.

Green, white, red, yellow, sweet, shallots, leeks, pearl, torpedo, Creole, Mayan, cipolline, Inca, French gray, or Wawa - call them what you want, but I’m not buying it.

At the restaurant, and I should say most of the restaurants we frequent have menus sealed in plastic, you see the prices attached, and you're thinking, if that's what I'm paying, I don't want to make a mistake because I'm certainly not one courageous enough to send it back. So, I'm easily unnerved by suspicions of culinary onion subterfuge, which, of course, means I'm rendered catatonic when the chicken salad sandwich comes with potato salad, a potential onion disaster. Maybe that's why I like those online menus that allow you to customize your entree: Fritos, yes! Onions, nope!

We're raised to be consumers, discriminating consumers. Now, let's be honest for a moment (I mean we're in church, right?) I'm an odd bird, okay, but surely I am not the only one who walks into a store, and when the sales clerk steps up the charm — *Live here or just passing through? What are you looking for? Can I help you find something? Our Gingham shirts are on sale; and a shipment of new khakis just arrived. Could I interest you in a nice pinstripe suit? Can I follow you around the store, close-talking you to death, just making sure you don't miss your size?* — what I'm thinking is — *Nooo, I don't want you to tell me what I want. I want to find what I want. In fact, why*

*don't you take a lunch break and let me have the place to myself. Give me your cell # and I'll text if I have a question.*

We want what we want, the way we want it, and when we want it. In fact, we'd prefer the whole world to fall in line with our expectations ... and that world includes people, people we drag through an ever-oscillating and functionally erratic sifter as we form our team, the team that will inhabit our circle, the team that meets our expectations. Otherwise, you're cut: too tall, too short, too opinionated, too open-minded, too loud, too timid, too abrasive, too sweet, too driven, too slack — Left out.

Seldom does someone make it through our vetting process unscathed, and if we're telling the truth, that includes the Lord. We want a customized divinity, formed to our specifications, reliably acting in ways we deem appropriate, agreeable to our opinions, willing to be ignored, available for emergencies, amenable to our direction. And we are quickly disillusioned when we discover that if God is any of those things, it would not be God. The prophet Isaiah reports what God discloses, "I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols ... For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."

Author Rob Bell suggested that, “The moment God is figured out with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God.” (Rob Bell, *Velvet Jesus*) God is wholly other, meaning that if all human knowledge was wrapped in a package, it would be infinitesimally smaller than the single quark racing through the Hadron collider when set next to the mind of God.

God is not customizable, doesn't come with options we can add or eliminate. God is. When Moses asked about God's name, the voice of heaven said, “I am.” Theologian Karl Barth said, “God is known through God and through God alone.” He also said, “The being of God is either known by grace or it is not known at all.” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*) Which is to say that coming to faith is never a build-a-bear project. So, when we hear ourselves say something like, “I can't believe in a God who...” we need to stop right there, acknowledging we are speaking of things we do not know about the One in whom we are known. We do not have the luxury of shaping and forming God to our specifications; we are those who worship and serve the One in whom we are shaped and formed.

I think this is the hiccup in the narrative of the risen Lord and Thomas. Thomas bears the burden of being a cultural aphorism with an

adjective perpetually attached to his name. I'd hate to find out what my legacy would be if my life was summed up for posterity in a single adjective glued to my name. Doubting Thomas. Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Wiccan, Buddhist, it doesn't matter your tradition, nationality, or language; or whether you have ever darkened the doors of a church or opened a Bible; if someone calls you a doubting Thomas, you know exactly what they are saying. You are the first to be skeptical, suspicious, dubious, cautious, distrustful, cynical, full of reservations, wary. Doubting Thomas. Hey Thomas, I feel your pain. *So, Matt, did you grow up here?* No, I'm from Missouri. *Missouri, huh? Show me state, hardee har har!* Yeah, well ... whatever.

Doubting Thomas. Forever constrained by an adjective. Yet, I'm not so sure doubt is the central issue in this encounter between the risen Lord and Thomas. First of all, Thomas wasn't present when the risen Jesus did that surprise Houdini bit, walking through that locked door, so Thomas missed the whole stupefying Ta-Da moment. We're not told why Thomas wasn't there, but it is interesting to note that while Thomas was out running errands, the rest of the disciples were huddled in fear behind locked doors, petrified that they too, would be dragged away like Jesus.

We don't know where Thomas was, but apparently, he wasn't hiding out, and there's something to be said for that. It may be worth asking ourselves the question of what we do with our fears — do we go into lockdown mode or do we live? What did Moses say? "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Could it be the alleged doubter took those words seriously? Maybe Thomas understood that they couldn't stay locked in that room forever. Sooner or later, someone's got to go to the grocery store.

Anyway, I'm not so sure the problem with Thomas is doubt. After all, everyone is subject to doubt. It seems as intrinsic to life as dressing in the morning. We put on our pants and seldom fail to throw a couple of doubts into our pockets. It doesn't matter what state holds your birth certificate, we're not so different from Thomas. Even if you describe yourself as a trusting person, those butterflies of doubt are often tickling the inside of your smile. It has oft been said that doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is certitude. Jesus speaks here of believing without seeing, but don't forget the corollary that may be even more descriptive of what faith is: trusting without knowing.

Yes, Thomas (and don't forget that we are Thomas), and in our text today, Thomas is not sure what to make of the disciples' report of the appearance of the risen Lord, but I wonder if the crux of the problem in our text, rather than doubt, is found in a seemingly innocuous conjunction — *unless* — a word that rises to a profound description of the human predicament. My first theology professor, Donald Dawe, drilled this quote into our brains, repeating it incessantly: We live on the border between that which we make, shape, and control, and that which makes, shapes, and controls us. The problem is we spend most of our time trying to build a house on one side of that border, while ignoring the weeds and brush swallowing the other side of that border, the side that is actually zoned for our dwelling. Perpetually seduced by the illusion of control, we ignore the One who, in the Psalmist's words, formed our inwards parts, knitting us together in our mother's womb. We are fearfully and wonderfully made ... meaning we are never worthy of the title — self-made. Remember what the Lord said to Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth ... Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?”

Perhaps the biggest challenge in life is getting to the place of Job's confession: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

We are the children of creation, so isn't it a bit presumptuous for us to attempt to shape and form the Creator to fit our expectations? To repeat, when we hear ourselves say something like, "I can't believe in a God who..." we need to stop right there, acknowledging we are speaking of things we do not know about the One in whom we are known.

Hearing the disciples' news of the risen Lord, Thomas 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." The problem here is not a matter of doubt. The problem here is a matter of control and power.

Now remember, we are Thomas, perpetually leaning into that pesky conjunction — unless. Unless you meet my specifications, pass my litmus test, play by my rules, fulfill my expectations, I'll have nothing to do with you. No one is exempt from the net of our unforgiving conjunction, unless. Parents, children, friends, colleagues, ideas, values, God, Jesus, let it be to me according to my will not yours. Unless you perform according to my



image for you, you are dust and to dust you shall return. The problem here is not a matter of doubt. The problem here is a matter of control and authority. Who is going to play the role of Lord in our lives. Jesus isn't Lord if we're calling all the shots.

Just a few nights earlier, after the incredible act of love in washing the disciples' feet, Jesus said, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Leave the *unless* to the Lord, for *unless* is a dangerous word in our hands. If Jesus is risen, if Jesus is truth, if Jesus is "the way," then we must be sparing in the use of that conjunction for it can be such a destructive word — *Unless you meet my expectations, I'll dismiss you, ignore you, forget you...* Unless, so potentially destructive, so confining, so void of possibility, whether used in reference to our neighbors or to our Lord. We don't need a God who meets our expectations. We have a God beyond all expectations.

Our days should always be marked with the wonder of having our limited expectations blown.

A number of years ago, we had a confirmation student who volunteered to play a piano piece during worship. That's a good thing. We love involving children and youth in worship, believing that they are not the future of the church, they are the church now, fully vested in the life of the congregation, with gifts that enrich our life together. Sometimes those gifts include a wisdom that schools our presumptions. Sometimes those gifts are a little rough around the edges, maybe not fully formed, but gifts nevertheless, worthy of the discipline of our attention and affirmation.

So, an eighth grader was going to play in worship. I don't remember what my expectations were, but I'm sure they were modest. It would nice if we could pick out a melody or theme from her playing, but I knew the congregation would be gushing in affirmation, because I know that is who you are. So, the eighth-grader strides to the piano and I was probably studying the bulletin or wracking my brain to come up with what I might say for a charge and benediction. But then she began to play. Every head in the congregation, including mine, jerked to attention. This was neither some

glorified chopsticks nor the simple and spare notes of *Fur Elise*. No, this was prix fixe dinner at 21, tuxedos and gowns, limos to 57th St, and Carnegie Hall. This was no prodigy, it was the real deal, chandelier shaking, spirit raising, breath robbing astonishment. How did all those notes flow from an eighth graders fingers?

Our minds were blown, our expectations shattered, our Wow reflex triggered, our youthism exposed, our condescension humiliated. These days, Veronica Leahy is in a dual program matching Harvard University and the Berklee College of Music. She is an up and coming jazz saxophonist, having appeared on Late Night with Stephen Colbert, and with Wynton Marsalis at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Her original musical, *Queen of Magic*, was recently performed at the Loeb Experimental Theater at Harvard.

We try so hard to ram people into boxes that match our expectations and specifications. We attempt to do the same thing with Jesus. And in so doing we miss so much of God's good creation. It's time to drastically reduce our use of *unless*. We don't need a God who meets our expectations. We have a God beyond all expectations. Amen.