

Unless?
Reading from the Gospels: John 20:19-31

In the span of a few hours we move from an empty tomb to a locked room; from amazement over what is missing to fear about who is coming. It is safe to say the disciples were in a state of confusion. Have you ever taken a camping trip to that state? There are times when I feel like I bypassed setting up a tent in Camp Confusion and bought a house there instead. After all, I'm the guy you see in the grocery store aisle staring at the vast array of Greek yogurt like a chess player waiting for the magic move to suddenly appear that will forestall the already inevitable checkmate; or the colorblind dude looking for a Valentine's gift in Lily Pulitzer; or the Wordle addict down to her last guess.

Chobani, Oui, Oikos, Fage, lemon, blueberry, key lime, or, a new favorite, Bananas Foster. I look at all the choices, contemplate a different brand or flavor; repeat examining each shelf just in case I missed the choice I hadn't imagined; tentatively reaching out; quickly pulling back ... and finally, disgusted with myself, I grab the same ones I did last week, push the cart to the cracker aisle, and go through the same process again. Confusion.

Speaking of groceries, have you been to Trader Joes, or as it is often called, *Home of Satan's Parking Lot*? Have you noticed the little game of torture the trendy grocer likes to play with you? You discover some new product that just really *twangs your buds*. It's not just a pleasant discovery, it's a new addiction. You go back the next week and pick up two bags, and if no one's looking, you grab three (*I didn't say I was proud of it*).

Then, a few weeks later, you waltz in — no need to wander because you know where you're going, to that halo of light that marks the sacred spot where you'll find the hallelujahs for your heart. Only, you step up to the shelf that holds that culinary treasure with your name on it ... and it's not there. Not only is it not there, there is not even a space remaining for it. In fact, they have gone so far as to remove the label from the shelf, and there is no angel at this tomb to offer comfort — *He is not here. He's been re-ordered*. No one knows if it will ever return.

At first, I'm frozen in shock ... and then I just stand there, staring as if my eyes are fooling me, or that if I stare hard enough, I can will one to appear. I hate to admit it, but I've braved the *Joe's* parking lot three times in

the last three weeks in my search for satiation ... Nothing. What do I do? Do I write a letter? Stage a protest? Hire a private detective? Confusion.

And that's on a normal day! The blood pressure is stable. You are not running late. These are not life or death decisions. But what about when calamity calls? You saw the videos from Taipei this week. One moment you're at the Keurig waiting for your coffee and looking out the window to the street below, and suddenly the world is convulsing and you are shaking like the tablets being sorted at the pill factory and feeling like you are in some bizarrely esoteric *Talking Heads* video. Shaking and quaking with the earth. Do you ride it out? Climb under your desk? Bolt for the stairs? Run out into the streets? You've long forgotten the safety drills from your elementary school. Confusion.

Papa's heart attack, a teen's car wreck, a house fire, an unexpected call from an estranged friend, a job offer out of nowhere. Shock, disorientation, deer-in-the-headlights eyes. Confusion. Were you watching when it was announced that Emma Stone had won the Best Actress Oscar? I haven't seen the movie. I'm not sure my mom would allow it. It's adults only, apparently.

But Stone's reaction when her name was read was priceless. Granted she's an actor so it could have been rehearsed, but her look of frozen shock and confusion was much like the dazed confusion our friends observe in us when, unprepared, we meet the unexpected. *What? W-What am I supposed to do now?*

I would contend that the disciples, and particularly Thomas, have been subjected to unwarranted abuse and judgement through the centuries as readers have projected upon them that of which we are no less guilty. Were the disciples at times obtuse and blind? Sure ... but couldn't the same be said of us? Was the disciple's nerve found lacking when the darkest hours of Jerusalemgate arrived, and the authorities sought to silence the threat? Yes ... but how quick are we to compromise our values in order to conceal our iniquities or save our skin? Before you answer, remember what it says in 1 John — *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”*

Consider the events from the vantage point of the disciples instead of judging them through the luxury we have of looking back. How quick we are to assume the role of Monday morning quarterback, trashing those

whose skills we don't possess, facing terrors and pressures we will never know. Remember, these are the folks whose first impression of Jesus was enough to leave their boats, their homes, the lives they had lived up to that point; to leave it all behind and follow this charismatic stranger. It's not that they were the gullible type, nor would you find many free spirits owning a fishing trawler. There was something in this Jesus that could not be ignored. His voice **had** to be followed. There were no brochures handed out, travelogues to preview, or itineraries informing them of the route, the scope of the trip, the activities available, or the flight home. "*Immediately*" is the word the Gospel writers use to describe how long it took for the disciples to leave everything behind.

And they followed Jesus from village to village, from one side of the Galilean sea to the other, around Samaria and down to Jerusalem. They listened as Jesus taught; stood in amazement as he healed; were slayed with wonder as Jesus calmed seas, fed thousands, cared for the vulnerable, refused to be intimidated by the haters, and spoke in a way that no one had ever spoken before. The disciples were all in. Can't you hear them channeling Luther Ingram? "If following you is wrong, I don't want to be

right.” Could this be the one expected, the Messiah, the king of whom the prophets spoke?

The crowds were impressive, and at times, unmanageable. Everyone wanted to be near him, maybe touch the hem of his cloak. And entering Jerusalem, what an extraordinary, almost surreal sight. The people were laying a carpet of palms before Jesus as if welcoming a king, likening Jesus to David, *Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*

But by Thursday evening, the mood was increasingly solemn. Jesus wasn't his typically engaging, charismatic, fellowship loving self. The laughter was noticeably absent; and Jesus seemed so sober, so focused; and then the whole foot washing scene came to pass. That was awkward, uncomfortably gracious, a humility not encountered in kings. Then the body, the bread, the blood, the wine, a regular dinner became suddenly sacred, as if they were the first of millions to worship this way. They even sang a hymn, and those who couldn't carry a tune sang along.

But after that, it all became a blur. A late night, a silent garden, sleepy eyes, and something they had not encountered before, an anxious Jesus.

And then they came for him, bound him, took him away. For the disciples, just as it would probably be for you and me, the impulse to flee snuffed out any impulse to fight. The dream had turned to nightmare. This is where doubt entered center stage, pushing hope aside; and also taking the stage, disillusionment kicked future promise in the shins. An execution? A cross? The mocking of the crowd. The death of the one they had so hoped was the messiah.

Think of the trauma. They had been so entranced, so excited, so willing to get up and go, wherever the going would take them. In their minds, they were already dreaming of what role they'd assume in Jesus' cabinet and taking measurements for their office furniture.

Not gonna happen now, is it boys? Consumed with self-doubt tinged with humiliation, all wrapped up in fear, the inevitable questions blur their thoughts. Was it all just a scam? Were we seduced by a grifter? Or, were we foolish to hope one person could take on both Rome and the temple politicians? Did Mary actually see him, or, in her grief, did she so desperately want to see him alive, she believed she did, when it was actually

only a mirage? Do the temple big wigs have a warrant out on us? Are we next? Confusion.

And then, without signs, a warning, or even a knock on the locked door ... there He was ... in the flesh! *We thought you were dead, no, we knew you were dead.* They don't tend to bury the undead. He's not an imposter because it would be hard to pull off a con requiring holes through your hands and feet; and they didn't have CGI back then, so it would be a tall order to fake that wound in his side.

Did you know John is the only one of the Gospel writers to include the nails and the spear? You see, it was important for John that we not disassociate the crucifixion and resurrection. The risen One is also, always, the crucified One. Both provide the foundation for Christ's throne in the kingdom of God ... both make up the engine for our redemption ... both are the warrant for our hope and our calling.

John tells us the disciples rejoiced. Jesus is risen, indeed, but what happens next is equally important — *“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”*

Now, we can squirm at the thought of being breathed on by a person three days dead, but we cannot dismiss the efficacious power of it. In John's eyes, Pentecost comes on that first Sunday night. It is the Holy Spirit who forms Christ's church right there and then. It is the Holy Spirit who right there and then establishes the church's mission for all time. You've heard me say it before, and admittedly, our MBA's and Type A's balk at it a bit, but when asked, "Do y'all have a mission statement over there at South Mecklenburg," I want to say, "Why yes, we do." "Well, what is it?" "Jesus."

Everything we are about, everything we do that has worth, is meant to be infused with that Spirit of Christ, the breath of Jesus that fell upon those disciples (with or without the Listerine). They were formerly timid. They are now undeniably energized and empowered and equipped. Paul says, in the *Message* translation of Philippians, "*Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.*"

It's like in the movie, *Hoosiers*, the priceless story of the tiny Indiana high school and its basketball team reaching for the unimaginable. If you haven't seen it yet ... well, just watch it, will ya. Anyway, in one scene Coach Dale grabs the struggling alcoholic associate, Shooter, by the lapels,

implored him to hang in there for the possibility of catching the impossible — “You can cut it. I didn’t think I could cut it the other night, but after what Jimmy did, it would take the Indiana National Guard to get me out of here ... We’re coming together as a team. With Jimmy, all the pistons are firing ... Now you come along for the ride.”

The breath of Jesus opened the doors of that locked room, and in spite of all this world’s efforts to shut that door, it has not and will not be done. Jesus is loosed, and there is no containing him. You will find Jesus appearing in unexpected places accomplishing transformational things through uncommon people facing incredible odds. The love of this Jesus will not be tamed. To paraphrase something William Sloane Coffin said a generation ago, Jesus can ride the lame horse, the wild horse, the stubborn horse, and even the doubtful horse.

Poor old Thomas, it’s like the kid tagged with the unfortunate nickname, and is stuck with it for the rest of their life. Doubting Thomas. He deserves the nickname no more than any of the other disciples, or you, or me. Doubt is as much a part of faith as water is to tea. Doubt is not the problem, certitude is. I’d rather ride with someone who stops for directions

than someone who is absolutely certain he always knows where he's going. That's how you get lost. So don't call him doubting Thomas unless we can hang the label on you, too. Remember, Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. They saw the wounds. He didn't. As Fred Craddock observed, "Thomas' problem is not that he is a high-minded skeptic who will not believe until he sees with his own eyes, but that he insists on submitting the revelation that has come in Christ to his own criteria." Think about it, if God, if Jesus, if the Holy Spirit have to meet our litmus test to qualify as our Lord, aren't we essentially claiming the Lordship for ourselves? Thomas' problem is the same as ours, the decision to use the word *unless*. *I won't believe unless...*

When we make Jesus' authority dependent on our expectations, we lose. We lose because Jesus' love is so far beyond our imagining, a love no grave can hold, no wall can stop, no doubt can restrain; a love that knows there is no life that cannot be redeemed. Our doubts will never be greater than Jesus' love. Amen.