

SERMON TITLE: "Believing Well"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:19-31
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 19, 2020 (Earth Day Sunday) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to show you something that's very tiny. I hope you can see it. On this little blue post-it note, I've glued a flower seed. Can you see it? The seed is brown, and it's about the size of a piece of raw oatmeal. This little seed came from one of the wildflower seed kits that our children's Sunday School class was making in February, when they were studying their unit on God's creation. Before this coronavirus shutdown occurred, the plan was that the children would take these packets of seeds home or give them out to church members and friends. Each kit is made from a biodegradable coffee filter and contains some potting soil and some flower seeds. You tear off the label, which instructs us to place the whole bag of seeds into the ground, water it, and then wait for God's miracle to rise up.

When we look at flower bulbs and seeds that look like brown, dried up, dead things, it's hard to imagine that they could burst forth into life. And, yet, year after year our human experience proves that we do well to believe in God's power to use earth, seeds, water, and sun—not just so we can get pretty flowers—but so bees can pollinate and make honey; so we can produce vegetables, grains, and fruit; and so we can grow feed for livestock. Believing well is what enables us to eat and live. And believing well is what I want to talk with you about this morning.

1—BIBLE STORY

Let's begin with our Bible story from John 20. On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene and a couple other disciples had seen the empty tomb. Then Mary had actually encountered the risen Jesus out in the cemetery garden. Now, in verses nine through 23, we read that, later on Easter evening, Jesus appeared to the disciples who were hunkered down in a house with the doors locked. Not so different from us who have been confined in our homes during this coronavirus pandemic, the disciples were worried for their

safety. They were concerned that the authorities who crucified Jesus might come after them too. So they were sheltered in place.

But the good news of Jesus' resurrection was that, somehow, he was able to get through those locked doors and appear to them. They didn't have Facebook Live and Zoom meetings back then, but somehow, miraculously, God was able to communicate and show the disciples that Jesus was alive and present with them. Yes, they had all been through a horrific injustice and violent tragedy. Yes, the life of their beloved leader had been stolen from them. But, even so, Jesus was able to breathe the Holy Spirit of peace into their troubled hearts.

In verses 24 and following, however, we learn that Thomas had not been there when Jesus appeared. When he got back to the house, the other disciples told him what had happened. But Thomas didn't believe them. Unless he could see with his own eyes and touch Jesus' wounds with his own hands, he wouldn't believe.

It makes me wonder what kind of guy Thomas was. Maybe the reason he was gone when Jesus appeared is because he was the one who was most willing to risk going out into danger to buy some much-needed groceries. Maybe he was generous and sacrificial that way. Maybe he was the one who was most able do some kind of work to earn money, even if the threat was very real. Maybe Thomas was the bravest of the disciples, or the most fool-hardy, or the most stubborn. Maybe he just didn't believe that the risk was as great as the others thought. Maybe he chafed at being cooped up; he just wasn't the kind of guy who could sit around and do nothing. Or maybe he felt like he needed to get out and make some kind of spoken or unspoken statement that the authorities couldn't control him. After all, he and the other disciples couldn't stay in hiding forever. Yes, what happened to Jesus was a very big deal that would always impact them and others in life-altering ways. But, eventually they'd have to come out of hiding and return to some kind of normalcy. Eventually life would have to go on—one way or another.

Maybe Thomas was something like that. But then, after he returned to the house, Jesus appeared again. And this time, Thomas was there. This time, Thomas was able to see with his own eyes and touch with his own hands. This time, Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” This time, Thomas knew that God really had raised Jesus from the dead, and Thomas was able to believe.

All of us who are familiar with this Bible story know that that isn’t quite the end, though. Jesus had the last word. While it was great, said Jesus, that Thomas had come to believe through such a tangible encounter, blessed would be those who could believe without requiring such firsthand knowledge.

2—BENEFIT IN DOUBT

Because of what happened in this story, Thomas has gone down in history as the disciple who doubted. But I think we should revisit “Doubting Thomas” and ask if some of his instincts might have been valid. Maybe there is some benefit in doubt. Our experience today certainly teaches us that we shouldn’t believe everything we see and hear.

For example, in this spring of 2020, we have specifically been warned not to believe scams about the U.S. Census. Yes, by all means, fill out the correct and official form, and help our government count its citizens and residents. Fill out the census online or send it in by mail. There’s no reason to delay. For the good of our nation, our state, and our community, get it done. But, no, please don’t fall prey to a census scammer. Please, please don’t mistakenly send out your precious identifying information to anyone looking to cause you harm.

We’ve also been warned about scams related to the federal stimulus dollars that are being sent directly to our bank accounts or by checks in the mail. Yes, those \$1200/adult economic-impact payments are coming as a means to help us all get through this financially-difficult time. We can rejoice in this promise of hope for folks who have lost their jobs and don’t know how to pay their bills. But please, please, don’t give out your bank routing number or social security number or any other identifying information to

someone who promises to speed up delivery or help you cash your check. Make absolutely certain that you are only dealing with the federal government and not some bad actor who wants to steal your money.

There absolutely are times when we need to be skeptical. God gave us the ability to doubt for a good reason. Healthy doubt can keep us safe. In the right circumstances, doubt protects us from harm just as much as believing in risk and danger.

3—BELIEVING WELL

So, of course, the trick is finding that good balance between belief and doubt. We don't want to be gullible to false information. And we don't want to stubbornly ignore the truth that is right in front of us, if we open our minds and hearts. Believing well is what we need to do.

So, how do we do that? Well, here are some ideas.

Confer with trusted friends. Even though Thomas didn't believe his fellow disciples at first, I'm sure their testimony helped him to trust his own experience, when Jesus came the second time. If we are the only one seeing, hearing, or perceiving something, we might have reason to doubt it—even if the experience is very powerful. But if our perception lines up with the experience of others, then it certainly is more likely to be true.

Besides trusted friends and our usual go-to sources of authority, sometimes we might need to test our sense of reality against what *other* people are saying. This is where we might need to stretch ourselves. Turn the TV or radio to a different channel. Read a different kind of website or publication. See what those *other* folks are talking about. Is the message the same, or is it different? If it's different, ask yourself, "Why might that be?" We need to be aware of who is benefitting from painting a picture a certain way. Whether we're trying to sort out the truth behind a possible new medical treatment, how quickly we should open up public places, whether or not we need to wear a mask when we leave the house, or how fast we dare return to work, we need to be mindful of who is at most risk, and who is most likely to gain from pushing this or that particular narrative.

As Christians, one of our greatest sources of truth is the teaching and example of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves, to lift up the poor and the outcast, and to offer healing to the sick. Whatever anyone else says, we Christians must ask, "What would Jesus do?" How do we alleviate suffering? Well, we sure don't just look out for ourselves alone. God placed us in families and communities, nations and continents, and even together on this one planet so that we could look out for each other.

As United Methodists, we have the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to help us sort out what to believe. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience all inform us about truth. What does the Bible say? What has the church taught over these 2000 years of Christian history? What does the reasoning of the latest scientific knowledge tell us? And what is the truth of our own personal experience? These four sources of authority mixed together in the right proportions give us good guidance for believing well.

CONCLUSION

Recently, I read an article that focused on the fact that it took Thomas getting his hands dirty in Jesus' wounds in order for him to believe. The author of the article wondered what would happen to us if we got our hands dirty in the suffering of the world. What if we spent some time at the community food bank? What if we talked to the homeless man on the street instead of hurrying past him, looking the other way? What if we touched the wounds caused by unaffordable housing, inaccessible healthcare, and unsuccessful migration? What if we could put a face to those people severely impacted by global climate change?

As Jesus said, it would be good if we could believe, even without having to see and feel every pain up close and personally. But sometimes we do have to go out and get our hands dirty in order to remember that, if we cooperate in planting seeds in the good earth God has provided, God is the one who will make them grow. God is the author and sustainer of life, in this world and the next. This is the foundation of believing well.