

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Second Sunday of Easter, April 12, 2015

**Convince Me!**

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John 20:19-31

As was true on Easter Sunday, the suggested gospel reading for the Sunday after Easter is the same every year. These are the only two Sundays where this happens. Similar repetition does happen on special religious days such as Christmas, Christmas Eve, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, during Holy Week, etc. But it happens only on two Sundays, Easter and the Sunday after Easter, for very important reasons --- these two Sundays are perhaps the two most important Sundays in Christendom. Easter, of course, is primary but why is today so critical?

It is critical because it lays the groundwork for bringing people to the faith, for convincing them that Jesus did indeed arise from the dead. It would have been incredibly difficult to do that were it not for the appearance of the risen Christ to so many and most importantly to Thomas, the skeptic, the doubter. He knew all about Jesus. He had spent three years with him listening to him and working with him. Jesus told him that he would die and be resurrected but Thomas didn't believe it. Peter told him that the risen Lord had appeared to the other apostles, but it wasn't enough for Thomas. He didn't believe. His mantra was "Prove it! Convince me!"

To me this is rather like the politicians who refuse to believe in global warming. The proof is all around them. Days are getting hotter on average. The polar ice cap is melting. Glaciers are shrinking. The sea level is rising. The scientific evidence is overwhelming. But they don't believe. Convince me is what they say but they refuse to be convinced.

Thomas saw Christ's hands and his side and finally was convinced. But what is there to convince a skeptic like those deniers of global warming? There is probably nothing short of them being drowned by the rising level of the sea.

Consider those parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated against disease. A flawed report suggested that autism could be caused by vaccinations. The report has been proven wrong and has been discredited and withdrawn, yet thousands

of parents refuse to be convinced. They say, "Convince me." But the only thing that does convince them in the end is when their child comes down with a disease which a vaccine could have prevented. Even then, some parents are not convinced.

It is incredibly difficult to convince anyone of something that he or she does not want to believe. Look at what it took to convince Thomas. He had to see with his own eyes. But what about people like you and me who can't see Jesus with our own eyes? How is it that we believe? In some measure, we believe because John's gospel tells us about it.

In a sermon that she gave some years ago on a Sunday after Easter, Barbara Brown Taylor commented on the general low attendance at worship services on this particular Sunday each year. She said, *"It is hard to sustain the enthusiasm of Easter once Easter is over, once the memory gets further and further away."*

She mentions that John understood this and that the people he was writing to, like us, with few exceptions "... *had never seen or heard Jesus in the flesh.*" John was writing about sixty years after the fact and few eyewitnesses were still around. The few who were alive were very elderly.

So John was fighting a problem that every pastor, every Christian, fights day after day. How do you bring people to the faith when they can't see Jesus, when they can't touch him?

The story of Thomas gave John, and us, a way to do that. As Barbara Brown Taylor expressed it, *"By detailing that reluctant disciple's doubt, John took the words right out of our mouths and put them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do (or do not) come to believe."*

Thomas wasn't around when Jesus first appeared to the apostles. He was the only one who was absent and he was a born and bred skeptic. He saw the bad side of things and tended to expect the worst.

When Lazarus was dying and Jesus said that he was going to Bethel see Lazarus, such a trip was very risky for Jesus. There were many enemies there. The apostles were trying to convince Jesus not to go. Thomas was convinced that Jesus would be killed if he went and he said, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* (John 11:16, NIV).

At the Last Supper when Jesus told the apostles not to be afraid, that they knew

the way he was going, Thomas said *“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”* (John 14:5 NIV).

Jesus had told the apostles what was going to happen to him. The others believed but not doubting Thomas. He had to see things for himself.

Do I believe in global warming? Yes, of course I do. Do I believe that vaccines are safe? Certainly! There is overwhelming evidence to support these conclusions, Thomas had overwhelming evidence, but it wasn’t enough. “Convince me!” was his mantra.

If someone is totally unconvinced about Jesus today, there is little we can do to bring him or her to the faith. What we can do, however, just as John has done in his Gospel, is to lay out the evidence, the preponderance of the evidence, the eyewitness accounts, to others. We can tell them about Christ. We can tell them what the evidence in the New Testament is. We can tell them how even a skeptic like Thomas was convinced and, like those who believe that global warming is happening, that vaccines are safe, the evidence should convince them.

It is like the charge that a judge will give to a jury that if the evidence convinces them beyond a reasonable doubt, they must decide accordingly.

We know beyond a reasonable doubt that vaccines are safe and effective and that global warming is upon us. Similarly the preponderance of the evidence clearly shows that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Not everyone can be convinced of that but many can be. Some are skeptics like Thomas was. They will respond, “Convince me!”

As today’s disciples that is what we must try to do. Lay out the evidence for them. Answer their questions and concerns and pray that they are not as stubborn as are the deniers of global warming and the safety of vaccines for children.

**Amen.**

Note: Quotations of Barbara Brown Taylor are from her book, Home By Another Way, Crowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999

All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011