

## Message: "An Evidential God"

### Scripture Lesson: John 20:19-31

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This passage of scripture takes place three days after Jesus died upon the cross. The disciples have been not only mourning their master's loss, but the loss of a friend, a companion, who had grown close to them all over three years of ministry. Most likely they were also confused over all that had happened, that somehow an innocent man had been executed, that somehow something wonderful had been destroyed, that somehow God had died. Add to this a natural terror that they might face the same fate; if Jesus could be killed for the reason of his message, were they not messengers as well? Collaborators often received the same punishment as the one they followed; such Roman policy was well known as the means used to quell any hint of rebellion. If we could enter the mind frame of those disciples who had locked themselves in that house, it would be no wonder they were hiding.

Then, Jesus enters the room. He doesn't say "Ta-Dah!" or "Surprise!" or "Guess who's not dead?" He says something so much more helpful - he says, "Peace be with you." But then he did something even more helpful - he provided direct, physical, tangible evidence of the trauma of the past week; he showed

them his hands and his side, with the wounds still fresh; later, in the face of the doubts of Thomas, he invited him to touch the wounds directly. Much is made of Thomas's doubting, but not enough is made of Jesus' response to the doubts that come his way - he readily provided evidence. It's as if to say God will do anything to help us have what we need for faith.

But there is a small yet profound truth about faith that makes it possible or impossible, and it rests precisely within the realm of human initiative - namely, we have got to honestly want faith to receive faith.

I believe that there are a whole lot of people who claim to want faith but are quick to point out their reasons why they do not believe. Perhaps you've run across someone like this; I do regularly. It usually happens just after I confess that I am a Christian pastor; after a bit of a double-take, where they usually look at me a little be strangely, they often are quite ready to express their journey to unbelief. Sometimes it is a short journey - "I didn't grow up in a religious household." Sometimes it is a long, agonizing journey, where faith was skewed into something that caused profound damage in their lives, and they wanted nothing more to do with it. Sometimes, it is the response of disgust with the hypocrisy of the church, of which there is admittedly plenty, even though I find it tragic that they allow their faith to be cast off with the flawed institution. Sometimes it's a much more apathetic response, such as "well the church never did anything for me" or "I used to pray but nothing ever happens."

It's as if they are saying, as loud as possible, "SHOW ME THE EVIDENCE AND I'LL BELIEVE!"

But evidence is a very tricky thing, isn't it? It depends completely on who's lifting up what particular evidence for what purpose - and humans are very, very good at using this process for ulterior motives.

Take, for instance, the recent debacle regarding a famous TV personality on FoxNews, Tucker Carlson. Having received extensive video recordings of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection attempt, he cut and pasted together specific video outtakes that showed people non-violently walking the hallways of the capital, or walking around outside the building, or looking up at the paintings of past presidents after they breached security; there were a lot of "selfies" being taken. Mr. Carlson talks about how these "peaceful images" were kept away from public viewing to promote the false idea that the insurrection attempt was violence saturated; he mentions that the intent of the media showing primarily violent videos to the American public was to skew the actual happenings towards

outrage rather than understanding that these were mostly "sight-seeing patrons who wanted to peacefully express their belief that the election was stolen."

I don't need to point out the obvious problems with any such interpretation of an event where four people died, hundreds were injured, much of congress had to hide or run for their lives, violent rhetoric dominated speeches, and all manner of security was illegally breached; I believe there was a noose in the midst of it all? To put it in Tucker Carlson's own words, "the evidence is overwhelming" but not that this was a moment of peaceful protest; it was a violent attack breaching the protocols of civility and responsibility.

We get the evidence wrong because humans spend so much time shaping what is shared and encouraging interpretations that are self-serving in their favor; this is the case throughout human history as well as today. And here we have the key to how we can approach a more honest take on the evidential nature of God - it is not self-serving, but God revealing.

There is something consistent in the experience of being human that often keeps God from being discovered - the barrier of ourselves. People tend to have their own selves get in the way of God's revelation -- their requirements for God to fulfill; their expectations for how God will behave; their testing of God to conform to their principles of ethics and provision; their desire to have God predictable by human standards. And, of course, God will have none of this, for God never starts with fulfilling our expectations as motivation for interaction - God instead expresses God's expectations for us, along with God's general but universal nature to identify divine presence. Within those revelations are astonishing provisions designed for us, from undeserved grace to wisdom for living to principles that work to eternal provisions for life; but these are in spite of our own expectations and desires; they are gifts that we'd have a hard time coming up with ourselves. We get it precisely backwards so very often that it is no wonder we can't see God; we start with ourselves instead of with God.

"Look at *me*," says Jesus, stretching out his hands and showing his side. "Look *at* me," says Jesus, inviting a reorientation of our full attention. But more importantly, Jesus says, "Look *for* me," telling us through his life among us what to look for.

"Look for me where compassion is active - I cannot help but help;  
look for me where suffering is real - I feel it, too;  
look for me where justice is being fought for - I am close to those who work for others;

look for me wherever a heart speaks sincere prayer - I draw close when words seek me;

look for me in the beauty of nature - one of my favorite delights;

look for me in the brokenness of oppression - the pain of others compels me to their side;

look for me in the relationships built upon love - a gift that always comes with God;

look for me where people have realized we are meant for each other - I live there;

look for me wherever people are able to laugh with each other and cry for each other - I join in those outpourings;

look for me in the innocence of a child and the repentance of the villain - they outline the extremes of my love;

look for me, with eyes searching for all the forms of love that makes life true - and you will find me."