

Malcolm Clemens Young
32
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A17
2 Easter (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist
Sunday 19 April 2020

Acts 2:14a, 22-
32
Psalm 16
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

Leaving Sugar Mountain

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20).

At the age of eighteen, when I first lived on my own at U.C. Berkeley, I had all my classes in the same vast lecture hall and the room across the corridor from it. I have vivid memories of sitting on the benches by Strawberry Creek among the sycamore trees, outside Dwinelle Plaza, listening to a folk singer dressed all in white.

His name was Julian. He had long flowing hair and was only a little older than me. He often sang a song by Neil Young called "Sugar Mountain." "Oh, to live on Sugar Mountain / With the barkers and the colored balloons, / You can't be twenty on Sugar Mountain / Though you're thinking that you're leaving there too soon, / You're leaving there too soon."¹

"It's so noisy at the fair / But all your friends are there / And the candy floss you had / And your mother and your dad. // Oh, to live on Sugar Mountain..."

At those moments, with such exquisite intensity, I missed my mom, my dad and my brother, and all those county fair moments of my other life. Something inside me resisted growing up and yet I knew I had to.

Many forms of Christianity emphasize a dramatic conversion experience above all else. In some churches you might even feel pressured to think that someone can't be a Christian without a singular, defining mystical experience, without being "born again" in this way. The idea that a particularly moment might change everything certainly has a role in our tradition.

But I believe our form of faith focuses more on slow, steady progress over long periods of time. Coming to church, singing hymns, praying, trying to change how we treat people around us every day, working for a more just society – these actions ultimately shape our inner landscape so that we begin to respond to the world in a new way. Faith is this process of growing up. Luke describes it as, "knowing the ways of life" (Acts 2). John calls it having life in Jesus' name (Jn. 20). Paul writes that, "all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22).

Growing up can be painful. But Jesus promises that we can embrace change with equanimity, with a kind of deep, centered peace. This morning I want to study what it looks like to grow in faith. I'm using the Puritan sermon structure with a section each on the text, doctrine and application.

1. Text. Each reference to Jesus' resurrection seems so unique and yet there are familiar patterns. For instance in the Gospels of John and Luke, Jesus' closest friends have difficulty recognizing him. After the Roman Empire executes Jesus as an enemy, the disciples feel so disabled by fear that they will only gather behind locked doors.

Fear and surprise make Jesus invisible to his friends. They can only rejoice after seeing his wounds. He says, "peace be with you." He breathes the Holy Spirit into them.² He teaches them that they can forgive the sins of others. But Thomas was not there and he feels shattered when his friends tell him that they, "have seen the Lord" (Jn. 20).

I don't think of Thomas as primarily a doubter. He just wants to experience what the others saw. Perhaps he feels alone or guilty for abandoning Jesus or missing the meeting. But even in bitter despair Thomas keeps showing up to be with his friends.

In English a double negative (like "ain't no") is bad grammar but in Greek it adds emphasis. Thomas does this when he says that unless he sees Jesus' wounds, "I will [absolutely] not believe." A more literal translation of Jesus response would not use the word "doubt" but would be "do not be disbelieving but believe," or, as my friend Herman Waetjen translates it, "do not be faith-less but faith-full."³

Jesus is not against doubt. The theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) is right to point out that doubt is not opposed to belief but an element in it.⁴ Jesus is talking about the kind of believing that involves a trusting relationship with God.

Thomas feels full of such awe and joy that he uses the same expression that Romans used for Emperor Domitian (51-96 CE). He exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus says, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe." And John writes that his book's purpose is that through believing that, "Jesus is the Messiah... you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20).

My point is not that Thomas failed to grow in faith. His experience shows us that there is far more to faith than believing that a certain event, like the resurrection, happened in the past. There is indeed a believing that comes from seeing. But there is also a way of looking forward and seeing a transformed future because of what we believe. We see to

believe. But we also believe in order to see. This is the advanced course, the deeper insight into reality that Jesus helps us to realize.

2. Doctrine. My next question has to do with doctrine. What is faith and why do we need it? The answer has to do with what Christians call sin. The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that each person has a unique moral code. Almost inevitably this collection of rules about how the world should be is biased in our favor and we go about trying to impose it on everyone else.

Barth also believes that most of the time we live by the delusion that we can help our self. Our ego craves security, power, the admiration of others. And so we rush, grasping for things, "striving and fighting." But every success is hollow, everything we get turns out to be only a symbol for the real thing that we will never win on our own.⁵ Christians have this idea of original sin. For me it means that there never was and never will be a golden age. There is something in us as human beings that drives us toward chaos.

And yet through Jesus a kind of peace is possible. To friends who had just betrayed him this peace says that whatever separated us before is in the past. This peace is the inner freedom that belongs only to someone who seeks and accepts help from God. It is the peace that is more than absence of conflict. It is the peace we experience when we move beyond the question of what happened in the past and into an exploration of what faith in God might mean for the future.

That's what the disciples did. Through believing in Jesus they went from expecting the enemy and hiding in fear, to being witnesses of God who changed the world. Faith isn't just an idea of what is real, it is a way of living, of encountering each other with an openness to being helped by God. Religion is less like a form of knowledge and more like a longing for closeness with the origin of all things. Faith is simply wanting what God wants for the world.

3. Application. My last section concerns the danger of a certain kind of disbelieving. Yesterday was the anniversary of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. It happened on Wednesday of Easter week. You can imagine a few days earlier the fanfare at the largest, grandest church in the city on Easter Sunday. Little did they know that day, the hundreds of our predecessors at Grace Church, that they would never step foot in that magnificent church again.⁶

In our time we think of it as a devastating earthquake. But the shaking lasted for only a minute while the subsequent fire raged for three days and did far more damage. Three thousand people died, 28,000 structures were destroyed. Half of the city was homeless –

over a hundred thousand people were forced to camp out. Five square miles were completely obliterated making it the greatest urban fire in history before the aerial warfare of World War II.

As a young priest I remember hearing stories from survivors. One woman told me that this time camping in Golden Gate Park included some of the happiest days of her long life. People rescued and cared for each other. Money or social station didn't matter as much anymore. Everyone helped in whatever way they could.

In fact, the natural disaster was not nearly as catastrophic as the human disaster. Rebecca Solnit writes that Frederick Funston the commanding officer of the Presidio simply took over the city. His lack of faith in ordinary citizens meant that his men shot people for trying to help in the catastrophe. Out of fears of looting, that never really materialized, they kept away citizens who could have stopped the fires.⁷ In short this was a terrible spiritual failure. The leaders cared more about protecting the property of the few than about what the community might accomplish together.

As a nation we are in the midst of another terrible crisis of faith. At anti-government protests in Lansing Michigan, Huntington Beach, California, Austin, Texas and elsewhere we are seeing people taking to the streets because they do not trust the scientists, civic leaders and government officials who are trying to protect them from COVID19.⁸ In our case growing spiritually means becoming wiser about what we disbelieve. But it also means caring about what God loves and not squandering this opportunity to build a more equal and just society. We were made for this.⁹

I remember the last Sunday before the Cathedral had to close. It was the first time we knew that we shouldn't touch each other but before we realized that we couldn't gather together at all anymore. That day a visiting family sat in the first row. We looked each other in the eyes as we passed the peace. I realized that when I say "the peace of the Lord be with you," it means, "I want what is good for you and I believe that God does too." That is what faith means.

Every disaster is different. Unlike the earthquake and fire of 1906 the structures of inequality and the walls that separate us from each other are growing. We know that when life begins to return to normal, we will not return to the same jobs, schools and favorite places. They will have changed and we will have changed too.

At eighteen I understood that we all have to grow up, in our life and in our faith. But we do not decide what to believe on our own. God offers us help. Jesus cannot be prevented by any locked door from calling us to a deep centered peace that passes all

understanding. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe. May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

¹ "Now you say you're leaving home / 'Cause you want to be alone. / Ain't it funny how you feel / When you're finding out it's real." "Sugar Mountain," Track 6, Side 2, *Decade*, Warner Bros., 28 October 1977, Neil Young. <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/neilyoung/sugarmountain.html>

² This is the only time that the New Testament uses this word which describes how Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on to his disciples.

³ "Bring your finger here and see my hands and bring your hand and cast it into my side and do not keep on being faith-less but faith-full" (Jn. 20:27). Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 423.

⁴ "Why not take the risk of historical uncertainty as well? The affirmation that Jesus is the Christ is an act of faith and consequently of daring courage. It is not an arbitrary leap into darkness but a decision in which elements of immediate participation and therefore certitude are mixed with elements of strangeness and therefore incertitude and doubt. But doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Therefore, there is no faith without risk. The risk of faith is that it could affirm a wrong symbol of ultimate concern, a symbol which does not really express ultimacy..." Pau Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two, Existence and Christ* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1957) 116.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV:1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, tr. G.W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 2004) 446, 460.

⁶ Our former church stands on the site of the Ritz Carlton Hotel down the California Street hill from us. Photographs of its burnt-out tower became a symbol of terrible destruction.

⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (NY: Viking, 2009) 35ff.

⁸ Pastors in the Central Valley love their story of being persecuted for their faith so deeply that they are suing the same government officials who are so successfully limiting the spread of coronavirus through social distancing rules.

⁹ Some years ago Israeli archaeologists made an extraordinary discovery. They found an untouched burial cave of a family who survived the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Among the pottery and household objects, they found two amulets, little silver scrolls that had been unopened for 2600 years. With great gentleness they unrolled them and found the oldest parchment of any sacred scripture now in existence. On the scrolls was written, "May God bless you and keep you. May God cause His countenance to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May God turn his countenance to you and grant you peace." David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2008) 194.