

Limited faith in a risen savior (John 20:19-31)

The disciples don't believe Mary—or do they?

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April 21, 2017

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I saw something in this Gospel text that I don't remember noticing before.

It's the passage immediately following last week's text from John, in which Mary Magdalene, Peter, and (we assume) John see for themselves the place where their Jesus should be lying, deceased. Instead, an empty tomb. The men return home, but Mary stays and becomes the first to learn that Jesus is not missing, but alive. She goes to the other disciples and tells them, "I have seen the Lord!"

The next verse then describes the disciples that evening, in a house behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews." Locked away in fear even though they have already been told that Jesus is alive. Somehow, I didn't put this together before now.

My first reaction was *of course, the sexist little jerks*. They've lived with Mary and worked with her and followed Jesus with her, but when she tells them she's actually seen him, they're not so sure. This, of course, is well in line with the cultural values and societal constraints of the time; women were not considered reliable witnesses.

But there is another reading that hits even closer to home. What if the other disciples do believe Mary, yet still choose a self-inflicted lock down? What if they believe Jesus is alive but not powerful enough to protect them from their Jewish opponents?

What if they think even a risen savior can't save them?

While the first insight stokes my righteous indignation, the second gives me a haunted pause. Because I recognize this version of unbelief: belief that God exists but not that God can or will help me. And without faith, says Hebrews, "it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists *and* [emphasis mine] that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (11:6).

After experiencing two back-to-back miscarriages, I was fairly convinced that the God I serve could have allowed those babies to live yet chose not to. Even though it would throw me into a grief and despair like I had never known; even though it would leave me with a gaping hole in my heart and my faith. I had faith that God existed. But that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him"? Not so much.

So while the petty part of me would enjoy judging the disciples for not believing a woman with a trustworthy testimony, the honest part of me knows I could have been them. I have been them, locked away for fear that my savior would not save me.

Despite their unbelief and fear, the disciples are rewarded with their own experience of the risen Jesus. And unlike me, Jesus does not choose pettiness. Instead he shows up speaking peace into their fears, offering a true encounter with his scarred body to shore up their faith, even delivering the gift of the Holy Spirit--a constant reminder of his presence and care. And later, when Thomas insists on his own encounter before believing the disciples, Jesus mercifully grants this as well. Still, he doesn't leave without saying that those who believe without seeing are even more blessed than these who need to see to believe.

I'm not sure I turned out to be one of those people who found a way to believe without seeing. It took a long while for me to notice, but Jesus had indeed walked through the locked doors of my pain to speak peace, to reassure, and to reinvigorate the Spirit of God within me. I made a new friend who was herself going through a profound loss, giving me someone to cry and cuss with. I heard story after story from people--some strangers and others I'd known for years--who had been down the same road. Even my little brother, with whom mutual teasing is an Olympic sport, surrounded me with tender care. I got to see Jesus and feel his wounds, even as my own were still healing.

The Gospel text ends declaring that these stories about Jesus are told so that we might believe. Well, God bless those who believe without seeing. But for the rest of us, thank God for the mercy of encounter.