

“If It Is from God”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Acts 5:27-41

John 20:19-31

Where do you hide when you are terrified? Most of us do not have to literally hide from danger. But we do hide from our fears, through our work, or through that glass or two of hard liquor at the end of the night, through the gym, through food, or binging on TV. We all have our escapes, some healthier than others.

When I read that the disciples were in a house with locked doors because of their fear, I know this is not just a case of being stressed out. Indeed, the disciples literally feared for their lives, that they might meet the same kind of execution Jesus endured on the cross. And yet, while they barricaded themselves with their fear, Jesus appeared before them, offering them what is the opposite of fear: “Peace be with you,” he told them. And he showed them his wounds. Again he told them, “Peace be with you,” and he breathed the Holy Spirit upon them.

We do not know why Thomas was not in the room with the disciples. Why was he out and about? How could he be free enough from fear to be outside of that locked house? We can only imagine. But when he finds himself with the rest of the disciples again, and they tell him the incredible news that they had seen the Lord, he responds, “No way. I won’t believe that unless I see his wounds on his hands and side, and touch them myself.”

It is too bad Thomas got stuck with that name, “Doubting Thomas.” I am sure many of us would have felt the same way. If someone in this church told me they have never struggled with doubt in their faith journey, I would suspect they are either lying, or they are not risking enough with their faith, that it is so easy.

“There are seasons when we hold our faith, and then there are seasons when our faith holds us.” This quote comes from the millennial, bestselling Christian writer Rachel Held Evans, who wrote the book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. I heard her speak at a conference in San Francisco early this month. What I like about Rachel Held Evans is that she speaks from her Southern perspective, coming from the Bible Belt. She grew up in evangelical Christianity, but

growing into adulthood she really wondered about some things the Christian friends around her accepted without question: Did creation really just happen in 7 days? Do I have to believe in the virgin birth to be a Christian? And what does so-called “biblical womanhood” really mean? In fact, for one book she wrote, Rachel Held Evans spent a year doing all the things the bible tells women to do: “growing out her hair, making her own clothes, covering her head, obeying her husband and calling him ‘Master,’ rising before dawn, abstaining from gossip, remaining silent in church, and even camping out in the front yard during her period.”¹ Using humor and faith, Evans wrote of the process and came up with how she believes God calls her to a different kind of womanhood: one that is empowered, modern, and still faithful. Although she now embraces a more liberal and progressive form of Christianity, she has not lost three things her evangelical background taught her: a passion for God; a love for the bible; and the power of testimony.

The week before Easter, Rachel Held Evans was being treated in the hospital for the flu and a urinary tract infection. Due to a reaction to her medication, she went into a series of continuous seizures. Ever since then, she has been in a medically induced coma while they figure out if they can save her life, which includes being a mother to two young children.

“There are seasons when we hold the faith, and there are seasons when the faith holds us.” Right now Evans, who has given faith to many who had seen themselves on the margins of Christianity, is being held by the faith and prayers of those whom she has inspired. I join others in praying for her recovery, with the hopes that she will live to show her wounds in a way that gives testimony to the power of life and death, and of faith and doubt.

But it is hard to have faith in something you cannot see. That is why so many Americans choose profit over practices that care for the earth. Earth Day was on Easter Sunday last week, but we are celebrating it today at church. Our faith calls us to witness to the many wounds of the earth, most of them of our own making. There are some out there who would say that climate change is not real, or that if it is real, it is from natural causes outside of human control. That answer allows us to continue to do the things that keep polluting. And it is a fine answer, as long as it is someone *else's* neighborhood being swallowed up by flooding, *another* state devastated by endless forest fires, some country *far away* where civil war has broken out over who has access to the shrinking supplies of water.

¹ <https://rachelheldevans.com/womanhood-project>

But just a couple of towns away in New Jersey, there are proposals for a power plant placement in North Bergen. If approved, this plant would pump 3.5 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere a year, making it the highest emitter of greenhouse gasses in New Jersey. Of course, there are economic interests to the state and the town, as well as job opportunities that go with it. Residents nearby have to weigh that benefit with the reality that our air quality will diminish. Not only that, but the plant-- which will be built in the Meadowlands region-- will have an impact on that delicate ecosystem, including the birds, fish, water, and plant life all around it.

I am on the email list for Greenfaith, a group of congregations of different faiths that care about ecojustice. So, I was aware of this issue. However, on Friday, while I waited to pick up my daughter from tae kwon do, a 3rd grader came into the studio, threw her backpack on the floor, and looked at the adults sitting down watching their kids break boards. "Did you know that a huge power plant is going to be built almost in our backyard, and it's going to destroy our air and ruin the wildlife? I want to know what you're going to do about it!" she demanded. This child, I know, because she is my daughter's Book Buddy at the elementary school. But I also know her because about two years ago, she represented her Brownies Troop and honored our church with a Styrofoam Free certificate.

In a way, this child was calling us adults to look at the wounds of the earth. Put your fingers in them. They are real. How will this change your life?

As for Thomas, his life truly changed. If you ask Ammal Varky to tell you about St. Thomas, her face will light up. It is believed that Thomas the Apostle was the only one who journeyed outside the Roman Empire to tell the good news about Jesus. He ended up in India, and preached the gospel there, and so Christianity has had life in India ever since the first century CE. It is quite a legacy of faith, and if you ever ask Ammal to pray with or for you, you will hear and be blessed by a passionate faith that she has inherited from this questioning disciple.

Earlier today, our children planted the Children's Garden by the front entry to our church. Any of you are welcome to come and tend the garden, just as we tend the children's faith by loving and praying for them, teaching them the bible, and making church a place where their joy, sorrows, and questions are taken seriously. If you need a quiet break from your routine, come weed and water it. Suzanne can tell you when to expect the different herbs and vegetables to emerge. You can feel free to use or share

those too. Spending time in the garden may in fact teach you some things about the faith:

If you tend it, it will grow.

If you do not clear it from weeds, it will choke.

It is meant to be shared.

Jeff Chu, who will be graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary this May, spent a good deal of his seminary time at something Princeton calls The Farminary. The Farminary is an outdoor theology classroom of sorts. Its main crop is dirt, because so much of the topsoil has been removed from nearby farms that the land is very malnourished. So, on the entire campus, including dorms, apartments, and the dining hall, takes part in growing dirt through composting all the unused food that would otherwise get wasted. composting is taken very seriously. They send it to the compost heap, where students turn it over, mix it with other soil, and let the worms do their work of turning trash into something useful: good, rich soil that can once again blanket the earth in a cover of nourishment.

Jeff Chu, in a talk I heard him give, remarked at how growing up, he sometimes heard at church humans referred to as “worms” because of their sinful nature. And he always thought that sounded like a terrible thing to be. But at the Farminary, he says, he realized that he would really like to be able to be like a worm. To take something that was waste, trash, death-- and from it, create something that brings forth life? Well, that is a pretty powerful thing to hope to be.

In the early days after Jesus’ death, when the apostles were trying to spread the faith, the religious elders tried to stop them, and even to have them killed. But one Pharisee-- his name was Gamaliel-- told them to wait and see. “If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”

We all will have times when we struggle with questions about the faith: Is it of God, or is it of some human origin? We have no body as proof, where we could press our fingers into wounds on hands and side. We do not get that resurrection moment in the same way that Thomas and the disciples did.

But what we can do is offer up to God the wounds of our lives: the brokenness, the fear, the pain, and ask God to help us grow life from these wounds. If we, like Thomas, are

lucky enough to witness such life, then we can turn out to the world. We can find the wounded places, and-- because Jesus fills us with the Holy Spirit-- we can breathe life into them, too. Perhaps we cannot heal the blind, or remove demons like the disciples did. But it *is* within our power as Christians to testify to life where we see it, and coax it forth where we do not.

Whether our Christian identity is robust with faith or whether it is tainted by doubt may not even matter, so much as whether the practices of Christianity lead us to fruitfulness and signs of new life. So, have courage, Christians. Jesus has blown the Holy Spirit upon us. The work of Christianity is not only up to us and our beliefs. There is more at work than our own ideas, which will bring us to life in Jesus' name. Amen.