

Agnostics All: a sermon on John 20:24-31

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I love our youth Sunday school class. Most weeks we watch a video of pastor who is much cooler than I am-- sometimes he lights stuff on fire. After the video we talk about what we saw and heard and how it connects (or doesn't) with us. It's pretty free form.

A couple of weeks ago I surprised the youth Sunday School class by explaining to them that I am an agnostic. As usually happens when I say this, there was confusion— what is she talking about? And once I explained what agnostic means, there was shock—how can a minister be an agnostic?

I'll bet you want to know more. You may be one too . . . and if you're going to claim to be something, you'd better be able to explain what it is.

It's not always easy to say you're an agnostic. Another friend told me she's an agnostic like it was a secret confession, something to be ashamed of. **When most people say they are agnostic, they mean to say they don't know if there is a God or not.** Other people have dedicated their entire lives to researching and defining and splitting hairs regarding what the word agnostic means.

Today we are going to learn a little bit more than the average person about this word, but still stick to the surface.

The word agnostic comes from the Greek language, combining two small words to make a big one. The first small word is "a". Say it with me. "A." Great! We are all speaking Greek! A simply means without. Think of all the words you know that start a-something. Like a-typical or a-symmetrical. [at this point a little kid in the congregation shouted out "And Apple! Apple starts with A!"]

The second little word is *gnosis*, which means knowledge, usually spiritual knowledge. So agnostic is "without knowledge." A person can be agnostic about lots of things and it often makes sense to be agnostic in our society today. We know there's a lot we don't know. It can be easier to be agnostic than to figure some of this out.

When I say I'm agnostic, I say it because I know there is a lot I don't know, including a lot I don't know or understand about God.

I tell you all this about the word agnostic because I'm going to suggest that today's Gospel lesson is another Easter story of an agnostic, someone who does not have all the knowledge.

Each of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John relates different stories about what people see and hear and experience in the days following the crucifixion of Jesus. For example Mark doesn't say anything about resurrection. Last week we get to look at John's account of the first day, with Mary weeping at the tomb. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener, then she tries to hug him, and he tells her strange things about ascending and descending and then she runs off and tells the good news- I have seen the Lord.

Today we hear the story of Thomas, also found in the Gospel according to John. Thomas has heard stories about Jesus being alive from Mary and other disciples. Recently some of his friends reported that Jesus appeared in a locked room. And yet Thomas isn't so sure. If he's going to believe these rumors, he has to see and touch Jesus. He needs to put his finger in a wound. Thomas takes a different kind of convincing. I picture him asking the other disciples and the women question after question:

- How did you know it was Jesus?
- How come you didn't recognize him?
- Why did he tell you not to embrace him?
- How did he get into the locked room?
- You said when he said your name, then you knew . . . how did you know?

Mary's story and Thomas' story: both of these are stories of people experiencing something they don't fully understand- they do not have all the knowledge of.

They don't get it, at least not fully.

Remember, agnostic is without knowledge- we don't know.

Mary experienced something that she tried to put into words, but her attempt at an embrace and Jesus stopping her suggests she also didn't get it all. Thomas insists he needs to have more proof, more evidence, some kind of personal and concrete experience.

And yet within this not knowing, these first stories of people experiencing the resurrection are also clearly stories of faith.

What? Stories of faith . . .

Faith means believing something or experiencing something, and then doing something, being changed. We just heard in our announcements about Faith in Action, a group in town that provides rides and visits to folks. We heard about an upcoming move our congregation is facilitating, helping someone move from the women's shelter to an apartment. **This is faith in action, we believe something and it causes us to do things.**

Mary experienced Jesus and then ran out and started telling people about her experience. Thomas heard about the experience of others and asked questions and tried to get closer to understanding what was going on. Both Mary's proclamation and Thomas' questions were responses of faith.

They had an experience or were told about an experience with Jesus and did something as a result. Faith doesn't mean having everything all figured out. I certainly don't have everything figured out. God is always helping me see and understand new things about the deep love God has for me. I've changed my mind about things.

My questions and doubts have enriched my faith.

It's ok to be a faithful, believing agnostic. Perhaps more than ok, **it's honest to say we don't know it all. Agnosticism shows humility.** You've seen it play out in dozens of movies: when parent tells their child they don't know something or don't understand something. To admit we don't know- there's freedom in that.

When something hard happens, when something tragic happens, when we ask questions with no obvious answers, it can be a real challenge to continue to believe in God. Some people walk away when these questions won't go away.

On the other hand, being able to say "I don't know, I don't understand, but I still believe, or I may not get this but I know God is in this," in those situations agnosticism becomes a gift. We don't have to understand it all to have faith.

Easter Sunday is a celebration of God being present in the world in a whole new way. Death does not bind Jesus, but he may no longer be recognizable. Nobody expected resurrection and lots of us are still trying to figure it out. On Easter Sunday we are invited to proclaim "The tomb is empty! I have seen the Lord."

The next week with Thomas, our questions and wonderings are welcome, when we say, "I'm not so sure I understand all this. I have questions. I need to explore some more."

Wherever we are on our faith journey- something that is rarely a straight line, in the season of Easter we declare, "the tomb is empty." We don't need to have all the answers and we may say "the tomb is empty" with our own understanding of what an empty tomb means. Yet we say it with faith. Faith enriched, refined, because of our own questions and doubt.

We don't understand it and yet we act on it. We tell others, we keep asking questions.

The tomb is empty. Alleluia. Amen.