

*“Now What?”*

*I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31*

*April 27, 2014*

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Thanks to Tom Griggs for sharing this with me and, therefore, with you: One day God was looking down at earth and saw all of the rascally behavior going on. God called the angels together, conferred with them and dispatched one to earth. The angel reported back: *“Yes, it is bad on earth: 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are not.”*

God considered this report and thought, *“I’d better get a second opinion.”* So a second angel was sent and again the report came back: *“Yes, it’s true. The earth is in decline. 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are being good.”* God was not pleased. So God decided to e-mail the 5% who were good, to encourage them and give them hope. Do you know what the e-mail said?

Okay, I was just wondering, because I didn’t get one, either.

Then there was the couple who decided to go to Florida to thaw out during a particularly icy Connecticut winter. They decided to go to the same resort where they had spent their honeymoon 20 years earlier. Both employed, they were unable to coordinate their travel schedules so the husband flew one day and his wife the next. He wanted to e-mail her of his safe arrival but realized he’d left his laptop behind, so he used the hotel computer. But he mistyped her address and, not realizing his error, sent the e-mail.

Meanwhile in Houston, a woman returned from her husband’s funeral: a faithful, devoted clergyman of many years who died suddenly. Arriving home, widow checked her e-mail for messages of condolence from those who could not attend the funeral. After reading the first message, she fainted. The widow’s son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and saw the computer screen which read:

*To: My loving wife*

*Subject: I've arrived*

*I know you're surprised to hear from me. They have computers here now and you are allowed to send e-mails to your loved ones. I've just arrived and checked-in. I see that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then! Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was. P.S. Sure is hot down here.*

“Now what?” We all know that feeling of missed opportunities or frustrated plans and then, one more unwelcome surprise. The mail brings an envelope marked “personal and confidential:” now what? The worker, already doing three people’s work due to budget cuts and downsizing, gets an e-mail: “required staff meeting, 2 p.m.” Now what?

That’s today’s Gospel: the disciples, locked in a room full of fear, wondering “Now what?” We know the feeling: awaiting the surgeon’s report, the medical tests, the safe arrival of loved ones. Perhaps they were praying. One might hope, though prayer can be misunderstood. The Sunday School teacher asked their class “*How many of you pray before eating?*” “*Not me, teacher,*” came one quick reply. “*My mom is a good cook!*”

Prayers or not, locked doors were no match for the Risen Christ! In the midst of the disciples fear Jesus bursts in! He was the last person they expected to see. The “*now what?*” of an uncertain future becomes the “*now what?*” of joyful anticipation.

But one disciple misses out on the surprising turn and he’s been bad-mouthed ever since: Thomas, “Doubting Thomas.” The whole chapter is full of doubt and fear, but one disciple gets labeled. Funny: that’s what we sometimes do, projecting our own unresolved fears and doubts onto others instead of taking responsibility for them. Consider:

Nobody calls the beloved disciple “doubting” just because he didn’t believe until he saw the grave clothes lying in the tomb (John 20:8);

Nobody calls Mary doubting because she wept until she saw Jesus; nor because she didn’t recognize him by sight but only by voice (20:13):

Nobody calls the disciples doubting even though they are locked up in a room even after Mary Magdalene told them of Jesus' resurrection (20:18-19)

Maybe Thomas had his own "now what?" questions. Peter, who denied him, now says he is alive? The others, who ran away too, say he is risen? Who do they think they are? Remember: just a short time before his death, Jesus went Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem, while there were death threats on his head. He went to comfort Mary and Martha on the death of their brother, Lazarus. (Our story just three weeks ago). It was Thomas who was ready to go, pledging courage and loyalty: "*Let us also go that we may die with him.*" (John 11:16).

Thomas is ready in this story, too, though he wants some assurance. Not so different from us, eh? If Thomas was going to risk his life or his credulity, he wanted evidence. Note that it is we, not Jesus, who scold him for that need. We are the ones who label him. Jesus responds by giving Thomas exactly what he asks for. Want to put your finger in the holes of my hands and your hand in my spear-pierced side, Thomas? Bring it!

And Thomas does not disappoint. He utters one of the most powerful affirmations in the Bible: "My Lord and my God!" Can the same be said of us? In the "now what?" moments of our lives, when God responds with exactly what we ask for, do we respond with faith? Or have we become religious consumers much like we consume everything else, expecting that such reassurance is due us, an attitude of entitlement that says we ought to be reassured just because we asked the question. That may describe some of us but it is not the Biblical story.

The irony of "doubting Thomas" is that he teaches us how to be the church, a church that lives in a world of skepticism and uncertainty. In Thomas we learn to treat doubt with respect and experience a personal relationship with the person who "brings it," our salvation in Jesus Christ. Christ not only enters the "now what" moments of our lives with new possibilities, he declares that when we cannot see the outcome and still trust, still believe, still have faith, we are especially blessed.

Legend teaches that Thomas, inspired by new-found faith, went to India to proclaim the Gospel. I recently checked this out with our members, Hector and Premila Arnold, who are natives of that country. Sure enough: the Mar Thoma church in India today claims Thomas as its spiritual forebear. The opportunity before us is to go out from the locked room; to turn the “*now what?*” of resignation or exasperation into the “*Now What?!?*” of anticipation. What good, inspiring, life-changing, resurrection-living thing is God in Christ going to do today? Thomas had eyes to see the answer to his faith question. Will we? Thomas responded with words *and* deeds. Let us pray for faith and courage to do the same.