

“Relationship over Rules. Love over Performance.” by Brenda Seat

April 8, 2018



2nd Sunday of Easter

Relationship over Rules. Love over Performance.

Seekers Church 4-8-18

Brenda Seat

In my Spirit Report for Holy Week I wrote the following:

I feel unprepared for Easter. I feel like I am carrying around a lot of “burial clothes” and am not ready to emerge from my tomb. I am not certain what new life is emerging or whether I am really ready to have the uncertainty and discomfort of a “resurrection” intrude on my carefully crafted life.

Resurrection seems like a lot of work. Being transformed is not easy.

I was raised as a missionary kid in Japan. My parents were conservative Christians who had followed God's call. I was raised with many rules that were important to keep in order for me to reflect the fact that I was a Christian. Some of the don'ts were:

Don't dance

Don't smoke

Don't drink

Don't go to movies

Don't use swear words

Along with the don'ts there were also some do's which were:

Read the Bible daily

Obey the Ten Commandments

Attend church

Memorize Bible verses

I was a dutiful child, I loved my parents and trusted that they had my best interests at heart. I wanted to obey God and follow Jesus, so for the most part I followed all these rules without a lot of fuss.

I went away to boarding school for first grade and of course there were more rules to follow there, but I was able to accept them and was quite horrified when some of the older teens in my dorm were breaking the rules! Then in second grade something happened. In school our teacher began asking that we memorize a verse a week. Then our dorm parents thought it would be great if we memorized a verse a week too. Then I

joined Camp Fire Girls, a Christian version of Girls Scouts, and they encouraged us to memorize verses in order to get various badges. Then in Sunday School we were asked to memorize the 23rd Psalm, and on Sunday evening we had a young kids group called Jet Cadets where we had “sword drills” where you raced to find a verse in the Bible, and also were asked to memorize verses to advance and get prizes.

Not surprisingly, I was overwhelmed. On one of my breaks when I went home I told my parents about all I had to memorize. They later told me that I said I hated the Bible, which alarmed them. I don't remember saying that particularly but I remember that feeling of being overwhelmed. We talked it all over and my parents told me that I needed to do my best and that the main thing was to memorize the verses for school, and then everything else was extra. I was a bit skeptical but reassured. Unbeknownst to me my parents wrote a letter to my dorm parents. They said that they had decided that I only needed to memorize the verses required for school and no other verses unless I wanted to. My parents asked that the dorm parents not put any pressure on me to do anything more. Evidently that caused some controversy, and they got some pushback, but eventually my dorm parents accepted my parents' request, and all the other dorm kids were very jealous that I got out of all that extra memorization.

I find this an amazing thing for my parents to have done. This could not have been easy for them. And yet they chose: *Relationship over rules. Love over performance.*

Our main text for this morning is the story of Doubting Thomas. If you google “Doubting Thomas” you will get the following: “a skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience.”

The disciple Thomas is someone who would do well in this era of “Fake News.” Yes, he heard all the other disciples talking about seeing the resurrected Christ, but he wasn't going to

let his friendship with them get in the way of hard facts. He needed to see it for himself. I don't know about you, but I identify with Thomas. I know we aren't really supposed to. He is the foil in this story, the one you are not supposed to be like. But to me, he is the one who makes sense, the one who in the face of a world gone crazy holds the line and asks for some sanity, some reality-based reporting, some fact-checking.

Thomas is recorded as speaking in two other places in the Bible. One is in John 11 where, soon after the raising of Lazarus, the disciples are arguing over where to go next. Jesus wants to go back to Judea, but the disciples were worried since some people in that area had attempted to stone Jesus and so they wanted to go somewhere safer. But Thomas speaks up and says, "Let us go also, that we may die with him."

In John 14 Thomas speaks again. Here Jesus has just explained that he is going away to prepare a heavenly home for his followers, and that one day they would join him there, and Thomas responds by saying, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

From both of these previous statements we can see that Thomas was fully committed to Jesus, even to the point of anticipating his own death in doing so, but he was also practical, grounded in reality, and needing some basic directions.

Going back to our lectionary scripture for today, let me point out that just about all of the references to Jesus appearing seem to happen where two or more people are gathered. There might have been more single appearances, like his appearance to Mary at the tomb, but they are not recorded. So our story begins by telling us that Jesus appeared in a room with his disciples and they saw him, but Thomas wasn't there at the time. The disciples are so excited, and they tell everyone all about it. Thomas's response is, "Unless I see his hands and

side for myself I will not believe.”

So was this response classic Thomas? Would all of the disciples who talked about it later say,

So did you hear what Thomas said?

Yeah I heard. Sounds just like something Thomas would say, right?

Or would they have said,

I can't believe that Thomas would say that! He always trusted us, so why can't he trust us now?

Because that is what this is really about, right? This isn't about Thomas not believing in Jesus. This is about him not being able to believe the disciples and what they told him. And with good reason. Remember what happened leading up to and after the crucifixion? Peter betrayed Jesus three times. The disciples scattered, hiding in locked rooms scared to death. And then they tell this insane story that Jesus had appeared to them in a locked room and Thomas was just supposed to take their word for it?

See this is why I identify with Thomas. It wasn't that he was rejecting Jesus; he was rejecting the fallible, weak, frightened messengers. I get this. I do it all the time.

So what is Jesus' response? First of all it seems like Jesus makes a special appearance at a time that he knows Thomas will be there with the other disciples. Jesus doesn't appear to Thomas alone, but rather with the very group that Thomas may not have believed in the first place.

There is something very interesting about Jesus revealing himself to groups of people rather than to individuals. Apart from the fact that it makes it more credible, there is something core to Jesus' ministry that he seems to be continuing here even after his death and resurrection. The

idea that faith, belief and hope are held jointly and not individually within the body of Christ. It started with Jesus choosing 12 people to be his disciples. It continued as he taught and ministered to people along the way. He was always reaching out, wanting connections and wanting to be in relationship with others. Even during that last night in Gethsemane. He wanted the disciples to pray with him and acknowledging even then that the disciples who were often so frustrating and shallow were part of his community of faith and he needed them in his darkest hour. Jesus consistently taught that a community of faith was the goal, rather than individual piety.

When Jesus enters that room he offers himself to Thomas for inspection, even using Thomas's words, saying *put your hand in my side, touch the wounds in my hands*. It is an invitation rather than an indictment. "Do not doubt, but believe," he says, and Thomas responds "My Lord and My God."

Love over Performance, Relationship over Rules.

So Thomas did believe. In fact traditions tells us that he travelled to India in 50 AD where he visited Jewish communities and gave them the Good News. He is said to have founded seven and a half churches, on the west coast of India, in present day Kerala, and he stayed there until his death in 72 AD.

St. Thomas is considered the patron saint of India.

There are many reasons why I am finding it hard to leave my tomb. Among them is the inadequacy I feel so often in my role as a member of the Servant Leadership Team as I do my part in caring for this community and its individual members. There is the concern and fear that I hold as I journey with Keith as we learn to live with the loss of sight in his right eye. There is my frustration and anger about my knee, which is still not bad enough for surgery but limits me and hurts significantly.

It is easy to get stuck in the tomb of pain, regrets and “not enoughts.”

But there are reasons for me to leave the tomb as well; it is just taking a bit of time for me to find my way out of the burial clothes. And that is why I need you – my community of Faith, the holder of this Hope, the body of Christ to me, to say:

Love and Relationship have triumphed!

Do not Doubt, but Believe!

He is Risen!

He is Risen, Indeed!

Amen.