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Doubt in an Age of Fake News
John 20:19-29

About a month and a half ago, Special Counsel Robert Mueller indicted 13 Russian nationals for attempting to influence the 2016 Presidential election. They were indicted because they allegedly assumed U.S. identities to sow discord on social media, communicate with unwitting Americans, and even set up political rallies from afar.¹ At the center of the controversy is a Russian organization called the Internet Research Agency, which hired writers to troll social media, generating and promoting fake, sensationalist news stories to push far-right views more mainstream and, ultimately, to benefit our current president. Russia has used this tactic before, to manipulate public opinion in the Ukraine during the war there over the past three or four years following its invasion and annexation of Crimea.² Now, we aren't strangers to sensationalist news – the National Enquirer has graced newsstands with headlines like, “bat boy found in cave” for almost 100 years! But the level and extent of the propaganda pushed by Russian bots infiltrating our news cycle seems unprecedented.

On the other hand, the current President regularly calls venerated giants of journalism like the New York Times and the Washington Post, CNN and NBC “fake news,” while repeatedly making false or misleading statements himself – more than 2000 in his first year in office, according to one count. With all of this ... falsehood going around, it can be hard to know who or what to trust anymore.

I know, we all lie, every now and then. We even have cute terms to describe our lying, like fib or white lie. Some of us may even have told a “whopper” at one point or another. Research has shown that some children as young as two or two and a half lie – and one sociologist says it's a sign of intelligence,

¹ McCarthy, Tom, “10 Key Takeaways from the Robert Mueller Russia Indictments,” the Guardian, 2/16/18, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/16/russians-indictment-mueller-charges-fbi-investigation-what-are-they>

² Adler, Simon and Annie McEwan, “The Curious Case of a Russian Flash Mob at a West Palm Beach Cheesecake Factory” Radiolab on NPR, 2/20/18, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/curious-case-russian-flash-mob-west-palm-beach-cheesecake-factory/transcript/>

because the child knows she has information that you don't have.³ And as much as we want to think we can tell when someone is lying – researchers show we're only right about half the time.

Lying is pervasive, fake stories are everywhere. So how do we know what is true? If modernity gave us a metanarrative of history and identity governed by universal Truths, then one of the marks of the postmodern era is an awareness of multiple, competing truths – the fracturing of story and identity into each individual's experience. This means there's no longer an American experience, there's only my experience as a white southern progressive female Christian American, or your experience as whatever you are. And what is true for me might not be true for you. Add to that linguistic theory coming out of the work of Jacques Derrida and others who say that even the words we use aren't universal across our language – what I mean when I say “truth” might not be what you hear when I say it.

It's a wonder we can communicate at all.

Or that we believe anything we hear.

This is where we find Thomas.

Poor, poor Thomas.

Thomas, who had the misfortune of missing Jesus' return from the dead. The ultimate case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Thomas was not with the 12 when the risen Jesus appeared among them and spoke words of peace. Poor Thomas. When he hears what happened, well, like any of us would be, he's skeptical. Just as the disciples must have been when they first heard Mary Magdalene say, “I have seen the Lord!” Thomas wants proof. He won't believe Jesus has risen until he puts his hand in Christ's side, and his finger in the mark of the nails – until he can touch the crucified Christ, he will not believe.

And so, a week later, the disciples are gathered again, and Christ appears again, inviting Thomas to do just that – here are my hands, here is my side – and Thomas believes, declaring, “My Lord, and My God!”

³ Lee, Kang, “Can you really tell if a kid is lying?” Talk on the TED stage, February 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/kang_lee_can_you_really_tell_if_a_kid_is_lying

In this strange time of shady propaganda and fake news, Thomas's encounter with the risen Jesus offers a glimpse of what is *true*: doubt is normal, and questions are part of this life of faith. God can handle our doubt. In Christ, God draws near to us and risks the pain of vulnerability, showing us his wounds, that we might know the truth that we are loved, that we are forgiven. Then, God charges us to share that love and forgiveness with the world.

We hold Thomas to an unfair standard. Everyone experiences doubt at one time or another, it's wise to have a healthy suspicion of anything as incredible as resurrection. He's not any different from the other disciples, he just happened to be out of the room when Jesus showed up. See, the disciples were hidden away behind a locked door even after hearing Mary Magdalene's testimony that morning. They were doubtful of the resurrection, too, or scared about what it might mean for them. Only when Christ came among them, offering peace did they believe - peace even though they had abandoned, denied, and betrayed him, which is all the more amazing.

Seeing the risen Jesus changed them – something happened when he appeared that changed their hearts and minds, that gave them the courage to build communities of compassion we read about in Acts, where they shared all things in common and all needs were met.

What was it? I believe it was the experience of *relationship* with the Risen Christ that convinced the disciples, that eased Thomas' doubt. Because when we are in relationship with someone, we trust their testimony – we believe what we ourselves have experienced to be true.

But this isn't a story solely about faith and doubt. It's a story that seeks to explain what comes next – the growth of the early church, among all those people who have not seen but believe just the same, people like you and me. Jesus offers peace to the disciples and breathes on them, giving the gift of the Spirit and sending them back into the world in love. They've hidden themselves away behind locked doors – but Christ sends them out. And they go, they must have, bearing the breath of the Spirit in their lungs and the truth of the good news in their hearts – that God's love withstands even death; that God calls all of us to be people of peace, forgiveness, courage, and compassion.

Anyone who has tried to get into this building during the week knows it's not easy to do. We're a downtown church – our doors are locked. When they're open, things can get a little ... interesting. One day not too long ago, the back door was malfunctioning and the front gate was left open by some roofers. Two ladies from Gadsden came in through the gate wanting to see the sanctuary. A repairman came in through the back to work on our phone line, and a homeless woman came in to use the bathroom and heat up a cuppa soup. Our secretary, Laura, was fielding all of those people and it was a little crazy for a minute. "where did they all come from?!" she asked, when things quieted down.

I wonder if we shouldn't have our doors open more often. Or show up outside more often. Our session has discerned God's call for our congregation to *REACH OUT*, after all. It is only when we are in relationship with our neighbors that others can know and experience and trust the love of God in and through us. When we are in relationship with one another and with God, the truth is easy to discern – we are created to love God and one another, to serve God and to serve one another.

There was for many years a house on Ponce de Leon Avenue in Atlanta that was called the Open Door Community. Some of you are very familiar with the Open Door, founded and shepherded by Ed Loring and Murphy Davis. Before they closed their doors and moved to Baltimore in 2016, they were an intentional community in the spirit of a Catholic Social Worker house. They provided hospitality, clean clothes, food, and showers to people experiencing homelessness. They were a home to residential volunteers, people who shared all things in common and worked together for the abolition of the death penalty, to visit those in prison, and care for those in need. The love and the life of the risen Christ was evident in the love and care that the Open Door shared with all who passed its way. Swapping stories with pilgrims in the living room at Open Door, sharing a meal there, hearing the volunteers report how much of their wages they were contributing to the communal purse, the truth became clear – love can change people. It can bring the marginalized to the center of things, it can uplift the downtrodden, it can set captives free.

There is a woman in Austin who put a turquoise picnic table in her front yard so she could meet her neighbors. She says it has changed everything about her neighborhood, because people know each other now – they trust each other. They've experienced what it's like to be in relationship with

each other. They aren't afraid to talk anymore. They aren't isolated and alone anymore.

This impulse – to connect with other people and be in relationship with them. To care for other people. To seek their well-being and yes, even to love those that at first glance seem difficult to love. To work for peace and justice so that all might flourish. This is how we both experience the truth of God's love for us, and share the truth of God's love with the world. Love that overcame death and passes through whatever walls we might put up to keep it out, love that is willing to withstand pain to let us see and touch and believe the impossible.

I don't know how we effectively navigate these challenging waters of truth and lies, faith and doubt. I do know that the experience of God's love, forgiveness, and peace in this community gives us a lens through which to view the world, to help us discern what is true and what is false, what is real and what is fake. I know that we must do this together. And I know that we must share the experience of relationship with the God of love, forgiveness, and peace with our neighbors. Maybe the first step is to open the doors...