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### **What do we have to see to believe?**

John 20:19-31

I just learned the story of a man that I need to tell you about.<sup>1</sup> His name is Ignaz Semmelweis. He was a Hungarian obstetrician in the 1840's and he's having a bit of a heyday right now. See, Semmelweis is the first guy who really realized that it was important for doctors to wash their hands.

He was a med student at Vienna Hospital in 1844. And one of the ways med students learned, then as I think they still do now, was to do research about the human body through autopsies while they were doing their rotations. He was in obstetrics, so he would shuttle back and forth between the operating theatre where the autopsies happened and the delivery room, where he would deliver babies.

And it was a risky thing to have a baby back in those days. Women of any means at all had their babies at home. Only those women with no one to attend to them had their baby in the hospital – and 30% of the women who did died. There was a disease called childbed fever – the woman would have her baby, everything would seem okay, and then a few hours later she would come down with a fever and convulsions and she'd die. And Semmelweis was haunted by these women, all these deaths he couldn't explain and couldn't prevent.

He became driven to figure out what was wrong. He did research and learned that women whose babies were delivered by midwives had a much better chance of surviving, but he wasn't sure why. He finally realized what was happening not by looking at the data. Instead, he figured it out when his mentor died because a student nicked his finger with a knife during an autopsy. And he realized that his mentor died in much the same way that the

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the reporting of Jad Abumrod, whose Radiolab podcast, "Dispatch 2: Every day is Ignaz Semmelweis day" and storytelling with Carl Zimmer was the basis and inspiration for this story. Podcast produced with help from Bethel Habte and Latif Nasser; April 1, 2020; <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/dispatch-2-every-day-ignaz-semmelweis-day>.

women with childbed fever died – only he had a name for his mentor’s death, toxemia.

He realized that every morning, he would have his hands deep in a cadaver. And then he would go deliver a baby with those same hands. He didn’t know about bacteria, he didn’t understand viruses – but he realized that there was something, some kind of particles, on his hands that led to a deadly infection. Semmelweis realized he’d inadvertently killed countless women. He was –as the reporter who I heard tell this story said- “he was carrying death to the place where life begins.”<sup>2</sup>

And he was devastated. So he developed a way to wash and disinfect his hands – essentially by washing and rinsing them with a lye/bleach solution. He didn’t know exactly why, but he knew that handwashing was key to saving lives.

The problem was, beyond his clinic, people didn’t believe him. They didn’t want to change the way they did things. They had a lot of questions – they wanted to know why washing your hands worked, and why did it work some times but not others? Had he ever seen these particles? How could he know they were there?

Semmelweis wrote letter after letter to his colleagues, urging them to adopt his lifesaving practice. But for the most part, they didn’t. If they had, think how many lives could have been saved in the years between his work and Louis Pasteur’s discovery of germ theory.

To whom do we listen? What do we have to see to believe? How do we know what is true? How do we weigh competing truth claims and assimilate new information that completely changes our understanding of the world? We have access to more news and information, faster than any other humans in history – but it’s harder than ever to know what sources to trust. We are living in an age of doubt, a golden age of conspiracy theories. I mean, people have been attacking cell phone towers, desperate for some explanation for the rapid spread of the virus. Too many look for certainty in the wrong places, or dismiss the science completely. We can’t see it. We don’t believe it. We feel just fine.

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<sup>2</sup> Abumrod, Jad, *ibid.*

Thomas knows a little something about doubt. Poor guy has been the poster child for doubt for millennia. But history has been too hard on Thomas. Sure, he was dubious of the disciples' claims of resurrection. After all, death is inevitable, and the dead stay dead. Thomas wasn't alone: when they'd heard the women's claims of an empty tomb that morning, the other disciples were skeptical, too. Why else would they have been hidden away behind closed doors? Their leader was dead, killed by the state! They were afraid they would be next!

But Christ came and stood among them, speaking peace. Locked doors couldn't keep him out. Somehow, the one who was dead was alive again and they were overcome with joy. The one they'd betrayed, denied, and abandoned greeted them as friends. And the work they thought was over had only just begun.

I don't understand how it worked. The center of our faith is a mystery. But I do trust that as they were hidden away, closed off from the rest of the world, scared and worried about what the coming days would bring, Christ came and was present among them. He calmed their fear with words of peace. He shared the power of the Holy Spirit. He charged them to continue his lifegiving work to reconcile and make new, sharing the good news of God's grace with all people.

But Thomas missed it. Who can blame him for wanting some confirmation! Just to see. Just to hear. Just to touch. To know for certain that Christ, the one who was crucified, had risen.

I wonder if Thomas was brimming with doubt and disappointment when Christ showed up to him a week later. But Jesus didn't scold him. This tells me that doubt is normal, and questions are how we build a durable 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.

This story really resonates with me right now – maybe it does with you, too. I can suddenly identify with the disciples hidden away from the rest of the world, shut off from their community, grief-stricken, and longing for a glimmer of hope. These days of isolation and anxiety inevitably take a toll – mentally, emotionally, physically.

But, friends, we may be apart, but we are not alone. We are in this together. I wonder - Who has reached out to you during this time of social distancing and offered you a lifeline? To whom might you reach out? How might we be more like Christ, being vulnerable and honest about how we are, and listening as others do the same? I hope this afternoon, or in the days ahead, you'll pick up the phone, and make a call to someone you think might need to hear from you. Ask how they're doing. And really listen – be present to them as they respond.

It seems like a small thing, I know. but it could be a way that together, we live into our hope for the future. For our community. For this congregation.

We can't see relationship, our ties to one another. We can't see grace any more than we can see the germs on our hands or the virus on a doorknob. I can't see it, but I do believe it. Because I have experienced grace, and the love of God in and through all of you. I don't have to see it to know that it's real. To trust that even in this time of so much death, with makeshift morgues outside of hospitals, and fear, and worry - God is at work, in and through us, meeting us in our grief, our fear, our doubt. Offering peace. Calling us to life in relationship with one another. Thanks be to God.