

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 150
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

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What is Truth?

There is a wonderful little Oregon road trip Jim and I like to take whenever we can. We make the easy drive to Portland, check in to our favorite hotel, drop our bags and head out to Powell's. Do you know Powell's? It is a most amazing bookstore, a full block's worth of bookstore with several floors and mezzanines and a science annex down the road. Jim makes his way around the art, architecture, photography, cinema, religion, literature and travel sections. I rarely get out of the cookbook section. We usually spend a couple of hours then go back to the hotel and get ready to go to dinner, most often, Italian. The next day begins at the Byways Café followed by a visit to Oblation, a most amazing letterpress and paper store, another visit to Powell's then lunch and we're on the road to the coast. Having loaded up on books – yes, I do read cookbooks cover to cover – we head to Newport Oregon and the Sylvia Beach Hotel.

For a long time I thought Sylvia Beach was the name of the beach the hotel sits above. But Sylvia Beach was an American born bookseller who moved to Paris and in the 20's opened Shakespeare and Company, a bookshop filled with American and British publications. She was part of that amazing expat community that included Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and all the rest. The hotel that is her namesake calls itself a hotel for readers. Every room evokes a particular author – those who were her friends in Paris, but also Dr. Seuss, J. K. Rowling, Amy Tan, Oscar Wilde, Emily Austin and of course, Shakespeare. The top floor of the hotel – which is really a giant old house perched on a hill above the ocean – is a library with overstuffed chairs and couches, a fireplace, and a perfectly placed reading lamp for every seat. You can have dinner at the hotel's restaurant, Tables of Content. If you dine there, you are seated at a table with other hotel guests. Dinner begins with an appetizer, something to drink, and two truths and a lie. Do you know two truths and a lie? Everyone at the table tells two true things about themselves, and one lie. We all guess which are the truths and which is the lie. It's a silly and wonderful entrée into some very extraordinary conversations, some of which actually turn to the question, What is truth?

I've been thinking a lot about that question, especially about Pilate asking Jesus What is truth? Those two truths and a lie people tell around the Tables of Content at the Sylvia Beach hotel are mostly things that happened or didn't, and not the kinds of ultimate truths we might struggle to work out for ourselves. But that question – What is truth?, and the way we answer it has a lot to do with the way we live our lives. What is truth? Is it certainty? Is it something we can prove with our senses, with equations, with our stories? Does something have to have happened in order for it to be true? What is truth?

I think when the stakes are high, when something matters deeply to us, we want to be certain, and we think proof is what we need so that we can be certain. That's where we drop into

Thomas' story today. He's a man looking for some sort of proof, a man looking for truth. And interestingly, throughout time, Thomas' search for truth has often been construed as doubt. It's kind of a big leap, really. Think about the two resurrection appearances we've witnessed since Jesus rose from the dead last Sunday. Mary Magdalene didn't recognize Jesus until he called her by name. And the twelve disciples, at least two of whom had been to the tomb themselves, all of whom had heard from one another that Jesus had risen? They weren't out in the streets proclaiming the truth of Christ crucified and raised from the dead. Do you imagine they were certain of the truth of the resurrection, when we find them huddled in a secret room, terrified that the authorities will come after them next. What is truth?

There are some things we know are true. The disciples had been together for a very long time, living together, working together, preaching and teaching and learning together. Jesus had been preparing them for the reality that he would suffer and die and rise again, preparing them for the time when the work of bringing God's kingdom to bear would no longer be his, but theirs. Jesus had given them the new commandment just a few days earlier, the only commandment that would ever again matter... that they love God and love one another. The only thing that mattered was love, and the 11 who were left of the 12 were to be about the business of building the beloved community everywhere. They needed to love each other. They needed to trust each other. And while they were all very unique individuals, they needed to be of one mind and heart in terms of the truth. What is so astonishing is that Thomas might easily have been excluded from that little band of disciples, because he didn't accept the truth his beloved brothers in Christ had offered him. "Unless I see the mark of the nails... and put my hand in his side, I WILL NOT BELIEVE."

You've come across that sort of naysayer – the outlier who will ruin everything because he didn't show up for the first meeting so he doesn't have the information everybody else has and won't just believe what everyone else says. That sort of unwillingness can create very bad feelings and great mistrust, and that was something the disciples really couldn't afford. That said, "I won't believe unless I see it for myself" is a statement we individualistic and self-directed 21st C Americans likely find completely plausible. But Jesus is not calling us into 21st C American culture. He is calling us to become the beloved community and the beloved community is based on faith and trust. It comes into existence only in love.

And it isn't just faith and trust in God, it isn't just loving God. We are called to offer that faith and trust and love to one another. Love one another as I have loved you Jesus said on that Maundy Thursday evening. That's why it's called Maundy Thursday you know – Maundy means mandate. And the mandate, the new commandment, the new law is the law of love. Do you see how Thomas's distrust of his companions could begin to erode the beloved community Jesus was trying so hard to establish? Erosion of trust breaks down community, whether it be the community of our workplace, our church or even our family. Some things really are true. They aren't my truth or your truth, they are truth.

As it turns out, the community didn't turn on Thomas because he wouldn't go along with them. And I can't help but believe that had something to do with the way Jesus had been talking with

them and teaching them all throughout the weeks before. When Jesus offered them his peace in that closed and locked room that night, I think what he was saying was *Yes, it was all true. Everything I told you that last evening, over that last supper, everything that happened as I stooped to wash your feet... all of that is truth. I told you that after I went away, I would come again. I told you that my peace would be with you, that the Holy Spirit would come upon you and that you would have all that you need to make God's love known in the world. And see. It has all come to pass.*

When Jesus offered them his peace, when he sent them into the world as he had been sent by the Father and then... and then when he breathed God's life-giving Holy Spirit into them, when he inspired them, they had all the truth they needed. As it turns out, it's all the truth we need too. When Jesus invited Thomas to come to him, to see with his eyes and feel with his hands the truth of who Jesus was, who Jesus is, he showed us truth. I don't so much mean the empirical evidence of nail holes in hands and feet, or the gash from a spear thrust into flesh. I mean truth. The truth that God will go to any lengths to speak to us in the language of our hearts, language that will allow us to make meaning of our relationships with one another and with God. I mean the truth that community bound together, learning together to follow the ways of Jesus of Nazareth, is human and fallible and forgiven and beloved. I mean the truth that God will never, ever, ever abandon us.

Before the resurrection, when Jesus was walking around on the earth, he made miracles, offered healings, preached and taught and was a living, breathing example of what it is to live one's life in God. Jesus was physically evident and the miracle of his life as well as the miracles he performed were signs of God's reign, signs given so that God would be glorified and people would believe. Since Jesus died, the signs have changed. Oh we occasionally hear of a miracle healing or a some unimaginable saving grace. But mostly the signs have changed. They come now as forgiveness. They come now as compassion. They come in caring for people we don't even know. They come now in the human form of people like you and me, the living, breathing, life-giving presence of God in the world. We are the signs now.

As it turns out, there really are some truths we can rest in – truths that aren't relative or personal, truths that are – well – just true. That our God is the God of love is a good one to start with. It may be the only one we need. To love as God loves is to understand that being faithful to God means being faithful to each other. To love as God loves is to pour God's love out for God's glory, yes, but also for the welfare of God's beloved people. To love as God loves is to spend our lives – whatever we do with our days – co-creating the beloved community God dreams for us. Because that dear ones, is to live the truth. Amen.