

Easter 5 – May 10, 2020 Cycle A

There are two basic ways to tell someone how to get to a certain spot: 1) provide fully detailed instructions, or 2) describe the general location relative to nearby landmarks and allow the person to work out the details for themselves. How we choose to navigate between these choices depends on need – the circumstance and the knowledge of the person asking. For example, if someone out of curiosity asks you where the Eiffel Tower was, telling them that it's in Paris is likely all the direction they want. Answering such a general question with detailed “turn by turn” instructions from downtown Fredericksburg to the Eiffel Tower in Paris would be annoying! Should they desire to make the trip, it would be up to them to “book” the flight, accommodations, local transportation, and so on. And a Parisian cab driver will have all the necessary local knowledge. Trying to provide detailed instructions would only insult them – implying either incompetence or untrustworthiness.

On the other hand, should you be stopped by a tourist in Fredericksburg and asked for directions to Enchanted Rock, they might very well appreciate detailed instructions or even advice on the best times to visit and interesting things to see in the park. Conversely, should a tourist ask you about interesting things to do in the Fredericksburg area, you might describe a visit to Enchanted Rock to them as a suggested activity – without providing any detailed directions. How we respond depends on circumstance: the level of knowledge and interest of the person asking and their willingness to receive our answer. Guys are notorious for being reluctant to ask for directions – especially detailed ones. We're supposed to be “islands” of ability, needing no one's help – at least according to the cultural “ideal”. There are exceptions, of course. It's “OK” to ask an acknowledged expert for help or a seek the advice of a close friend in private. For by the “rules”, these involve no public loss of masculine “dignity”.

Yet somehow, Jesus' disciple Thomas never got the “memo”. Instead of posing as a paragon of male ability and bravado, Thomas has a reputation for openly admitting his doubts and lack of knowledge. It's he who said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). These words, of course, earned Thomas the moniker “Doubting”. But beyond just revealing his “doubts”, Thomas' words reveal his skepticism. He needed to see for himself, to have things “proved” before he would believe. As I have argued before, part of Thomas' doubts regarding Jesus' resurrection had to do with the doubts and fears of his compatriots, their inability to muster conviction in their own “beliefs”. Peter and the others must “own” this. But so must Thomas. His reluctance to “believe” was part of his character; a flaw that held him back. We can see this in today's Gospel. In the midst of Jesus telling the disciples that while he must go away, he will return for them; even more, that they “know the way to the place where [He] is going”... In the midst of Jesus asking the disciples to “believe” him, Thomas blurts out, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5) This question, Thomas' whole demeanor, reveals his skepticism, his lack of trust.

Trust is an issue I've touched on many times in the last 15 years. I consider it vital to our understanding of Jesus and his message to us... Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1). As a translation, “believe” is both an accurate and an inaccurate way of rendering Jesus' words. He did ask that his disciples “believe” him,

but more than simple “belief”, Jesus asks for their trust – belief made concrete through action. The Greek of John’s Gospel carries more meaning than our typical use of the English word “belief”. Jesus is not asking Thomas and the others for their “belief” as in a “fact”, but to trust that his words are true! As they “Believe in God”, [so] Jesus asks, “believe also in me!” (i.e. the highest form of “belief” possible). “Trust in what I am telling you! Stake your life on it! Besides, you already know the way!” Jesus says this, but Thomas doesn’t hear. Here’s the essence of Thomas’ response, “You want us to believe you? Just tell where you are going. We’re big boys! We’ll figure it out.” Thomas could not have been more wrong. For the “where” to which Jesus refers is the Father, and Jesus is the only way to that “destination”. But more than merely failing to “understand” Jesus, Thomas’ words reveal a lack of trust! In my hearing, Jesus’ reply contains more than a hint of exasperation, “**I AM** the way, and the truth, and the life! NO ONE comes to the Father except through ME!” (Emphasis mine)

It’s an issue of belief vs trust. Thomas believes Jesus – that he is going way. He believes that Jesus will return. But Thomas’ belief does not extend to following Jesus in his journey (i.e. to the cross) without “knowing” the destination! Thomas believes, mistakenly, that he can know the “way” apart from Jesus. While we can “find our way” to places like the Eiffel Tower or Enchanted Rock, we cannot do so with God the Father. For that journey, Jesus IS THE WAY! To follow, we must have faith and trust regardless where we may be led in an “earthly” sense, believing that the path **leads to God!** This is not an easy thing to do or ask. “Would be messiahs” have led many astray with the words “trust me”. Dropping all pretense, Philip makes this point bluntly, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (John 14:8), that is, “Give us some proof that you are not going to lead us astray”. Philip’s words shock Jesus: “Have you been with me all this time... and still you do not know me? ...Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves” (John 14:9, 11). In other words, Jesus says that if you won’t trust his words, then **trust** “his works” – things that can only be done in and through the Father! Jesus does not require us to follow “blindly”. His works are proof of WHO HE IS, that HIS WORDS can be Trusted! “If **I go** to prepare a place for you, **I will** come again and will take you to myself” (John 14:3) Many funeral sermons have been founded – rightly – on this promise.

Belief is similar to but not the same as trust. Trust is concrete; knowledge acted upon. Jesus’ teachings are not philosophy to be considered or “head knowledge” to be absorbed. Instead, Jesus’ Words are our guide to life itself; words we must live by! Even more, only Jesus Christ can guarantee life, access to the Father! Yet when it comes to following Jesus, the destination is less important than the journey. God the Father is not a “place”. We journey, not to a destination, but to be God’s People, representatives of God’s love on the earth! Being God’s people – Jesus’ adopted brothers and sisters – guarantees life everlasting. Even so, this is not the result of our works, but of God’s Promise – made Real in Christ! Anyone can “believe” in this or that “thing”. Belief becomes trust when we act on it. This is what Jesus asks. **Live** as he calls us to: in love, humility, gentleness, patience, kindness, and generosity. Live Jesus’ Way – trust that he is guiding you to the Father – and you will have life itself! For Christ **is** God’s Promise made flesh. Amen