

# Pansies and ‘pistos’

MAY 1, 2011 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

By the Rev. Lauren Stanley

## **John 20:19-31**

Last Wednesday night, I was at an Episcopal church for the installation of the new rector. I sat in a pew with the rest of the clergy, and at one point during the service, the priest next to me reached over and pulled out a card that had been filled out by someone and returned to the pew holder. It was a newcomer’s card – you know, the kind where the parish welcomes you and asks you to share some information about yourself. These cards are supposed to go into the offering plate, but this person put it back in the holder. Because the writer didn’t actually offer the usual information.

This note was actually a plea:

*“Can anyone tell me if Jesus is real? (it read).*

*“Can anyone prove to me that Jesus is real?*

*“I’m sitting here surrounded by people who believe, people who have faith ... and I don’t know if I can believe.*

*“I want to believe, but I can’t.”*

This plea was written on Sunday morning, on the first day of the week – on *Easter* morning. There this person sat, in the third pew on the Gospel side, surrounded by hundreds of other people shouting, “The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!”, not knowing *how* to believe!

I do not know who wrote this note – it was signed, “Anonymous.” Below that, the author had written, “I’m learning to believe.”

I do not know if this person was male or female, black or white or Latino or Asian, young or old, gay or straight.

All I know is that on Sunday last, on *Easter*, Thomas showed up at an Episcopal church and in the midst of celebration, surrounded by believers, said, “Wait just a darned second ...”

We call today “Doubting Thomas” Sunday. Poor Thomas. Just because he wasn’t in the upper room when the Risen Lord first appeared to the disciples, we mock Thomas for wondering what was going on, and we hang an epithet on him —“Doubting”—as though nothing else he had ever done—none of the faithful following of Jesus, none of the declarations of “let’s go also, that we may die with him”—ever happened or even matter.

But a little warning here:

*Nowhere* in John’s presentation of the Risen Lord’s appearances in the upper room does the word “doubt” appear.

The Risen Lord does *not* say to Thomas, “Do not *doubt*, but believe.”

What Jesus says, instead, is that Thomas is *apistos*—without trust or faith. He was just like those other disciples, who had been *apistos* as well. They were untrusting just like Thomas (remember, when Mary Magdalene came to them *that very morning with the news of the Resurrection*, they for darned certain didn’t trust or believe her, because if they had, they wouldn’t have still been huddled behind locked doors in that upper room,

praying no one would find them!). They had *not* been *pistos* – faith-filled – until the moment the Risen Lord had bid them his peace *and* showed them his wounds.

So when Jesus showed up the second time, a week later, what Jesus *literally* says to Thomas is, “Do not become untrusting (or faithless) but trusting (or faithful).”

So you see, it’s not that Thomas *doubted*. It’s that he wasn’t quite ready to *trust* again—not *this* soon.

Remember, Thomas had been with Jesus for a large part of Jesus’ ministry. He had walked with Jesus, heard him preach, seen the miracles, felt the hope, saw the love, reveled in the joy ...

And then ...

Well, then, Jesus was arrested, tortured, killed.

And all those words, all those miracles, all that hope, that love, that joy ... *all* of that had died on the cross and been laid in the tomb, and now ... *now* ... just *three* days later, the other disciples want Thomas, who has given up *all* hope, to hope again? They want Thomas, who saw his trust violated, to trust again? Just three days later?

You know what Thomas was thinking, right?

*Give me a break!*

Thomas needed more than just the word of the other disciples – because he had believed once and been burned, and he wasn’t going to get burned again, at least not *that* easily. It took another appearance by the Risen Lord to convince him.

Sounds just like that person who showed up at that church on Easter Sunday, doesn’t it?

*Can anyone prove to me that Jesus is real?*

Thomas two thousand years ago ... an anonymous person on Easter Sunday 2011 ... they’re asking the same questions, they’re caught in the same bind.

They *want* to believe.

They just can’t.

Which leads to the question:

*How many witnesses do you need to believe the truth?*

How many witnesses do *you* need?

Let’s do a little experiment in faith, shall we?

Let’s see what happens when together, we do something rather unbelievable, and you have to convince others – let’s say, the people at the 8 a.m. service, because I wasn’t here for that – that what is *about* to take place actually *took* place here this morning.

Do you see these flowers here?

They are pansies – I know this because I went to a nursery yesterday and specifically asked for them.

They’re pretty, are they not?

They’re lovely harbingers of spring.

They come in an assortment of colors, which I have carefully chosen, because believe me, colors make a difference.

Why?

Let me show you .... (***eat pansies***)

Mmm ... quite tasty, actually.

And yes, just to let you know, it is *perfectly* safe to eat pansies. Not so much other flowers, but pansies are fine.

Now ... if *one* of you were to call someone who came to church at 8 o'clock this morning and tell that person, "You're not gonna believe it! The preacher ate pansies in the pulpit!" that person probably would *not* believe you.

Because unless I'm sorely mistaken, preachers do not normally *eat* pansies in the pulpit. It simply isn't done.

But that's what I'm doing, isn't it? (***eat more pansies***)

Now ... if, say, *ten* of you were to call that same person who came to church at 8 o'clock this morning and tell that person, "You're not gonna believe it! The preacher ate pansies in the pulpit!" there's a good chance that person *still* won't believe you. Because, after all, *ten* of you could be pulling off an elaborate joke, right?

But what do you think would happen if *all* of you were to call that person who came to church at 8 o'clock this morning and proclaim, "The preacher ate pansies in the pulpit!"?

Do you think they would believe? Because *all* of you were witnesses, and *all* of you proclaimed the truth?

My friends, I assure you: If *enough* of you testify to the truth, others *will* believe.

And the truth *is*, this morning, I *am* eating pansies in the pulpit.

So again, the question: How many witnesses *do* you need to believe the truth?

Going back to the Scriptures and the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, how many witnesses do you need to believe the truth of the Lord's Resurrection? Because we *have* witnesses. We have *lots* of witnesses.

We have the women who went to the tomb on the first day of the week and met the Risen Lord.

We have the disciples, hiding in fear in the upper room.

We have Thomas, who eventually *did* trust enough to believe.

We have the various other followers of Jesus, who met the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus ... in their villages ... out in the open ...

We have the 500 to whom the Risen Lord appeared at once ...

And then we have Paul, who then was still Saul, who was on a murderous mission to persecute those who claimed to have *seen* the Risen Lord, and who met the Risen Lord while sitting on his butt in the middle of the road to Damascus ...

Exactly how *many* witnesses does it take to convince you that the unbelievable is believable?

What does it take to make us move from Thomas' "I do not trust your story and therefore will not believe" to Thomas' proclamation, "My Lord and My God!"?

Do I need to eat more pansies to make the unbelievable believable?

Because I will, if that's what you need.

Just as the Risen Lord made *many* more appearances to his disciples, which John did not write in his book, because that's what those disciples needed.

To have their trust restored, to be able to believe again, to become *pistos* again, Jesus came back, again and again, so that his disciples could *know*, beyond the shadow of *any* doubt, that he was raised from the dead.

My friends, *we* are not the witnesses to the actual Resurrection.

But there *were* witnesses – *lots* of witnesses, *hundreds* of witnesses – who saw the Risen Lord, and because of that they became *pistos* – they trusted again, they believed again.

And because they trusted and believed, we trust, we believe.

That's why we're here this morning – because we trust and believe their eyewitness accounts, the ones they have been passed on to us.

So what are we going to do with this trust, this faith that we have received?

How are *we* going to tell the story in such a way that those who do not yet believe – like that anonymous person who wrote that poignant note last Sunday – can indeed learn to believe?

How are *we* going to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ Jesus?

We don't get to hear the story of the Resurrection just so that we can put that story in our back pockets. We hear the story, we become *pistos*, so that the whole world can hear the story, so that *all* can become *pistos*.

It's kind of like me eating these pansies in the pulpit.

It's a good story, but it doesn't mean much if you don't *do* something with it.

So here's what I want you to do. I want you to go home and pick up the phone and call someone from the 8 o'clock service (let's call him "John") and I want you tell him that the preacher ate pansies in the pulpit. I want you to *convince* him that this really happened.

And then, I want you to talk a little Gospel. Talk about where you have seen the Risen Lord in your life, today, and everyday. *Convince* him that the Lord is risen indeed. And talk about where he sees the Risen Lord in his own life.

I guarantee you, there are more Thomases out there. Thomas might even sitting right here this morning. Any one of us could be Thomas.

Whoever Thomas is, wherever Thomas is, he needs to hear from *us*. He needs to hear that the Lord is risen indeed.

Our mission is to tell the story in such a way that those who are *apistos* can become *pistos*, those who aren't sure, who don't trust, who *want* to believe but can't quite get there, *become* certain, *dare* to trust and *do* believe.

I'll even give you some pansies, if that will help. (***eat pansies***)

Amen.