

Story and Meditation: Do We Believe It Yet?

April 24, 2022

Psalm 118:14-29

John 20:19-31

by Eric Anderson

The young 'io had a problem with belief. The problem wasn't that he didn't believe, the problem was that he was certain. He was absolutely convinced, and couldn't be told otherwise, that he could not fly.

This is an unusual problem for birds, except, I suppose, for ostriches and emus. At any rate, it was an unusual problem for this young 'io's mother and father. They'd never seen such a thing from any of their chicks before. The little 'io didn't share the nest with another brother or sister, and there weren't other 'io nests in sight. He could see his own parents take off, fly, and land, but no other little 'io.

I'm not sure that would have helped.

He wasn't afraid of heights, which was a good thing given that the nest was over 25 feet up in the oh'i'a tree. He would hop around the branches around the nest, and even spread his wings when he made a particularly large jump. With some despair, his parents couldn't say, "Look! You're gliding with your wings open like that!" I'm afraid he extended them just to find his balance.

What a mess.

Unlike most of my stories, grandmother turned out to be very little help. She was bright and she was wise, but she was also not going to get caught up in the drama. "He'll fly when he's ready," she told her daughter, and that's all she would say. She did come and look at her grandson perched by the nest. She watched him, inspected his fully formed feathers, sighed, shook her head, and flew off to find dinner. The young bird's parents were approaching frantic.

"How will he eat?" mother asked father.

"How will he raise children?" father asked mother.

"No, I know I can't fly," said the son, and the parents sighed.

As sometimes happens, it was an outside event that changed things for the young 'io. A big windstorm blew in from the ocean and howled its way up the mountain slopes. The tree tossed and groaned. The nest, though soundly constructed, shifted between its supporting branches. Then a big gust of wind moved one branch one way, and another branch another way, and before he knew it the nest had broken away and was falling to the forest floor.

The young 'io reached out with his talons, but there were no branches in reach. He extended his wings in the hopes of catching a set of leaves somehow, but he missed.

Instead: he caught the air beneath his wings.

It was a rough way to get a first flight, swooping in a roaring wind, but if anything will shake your certainty that you can't fly it's flying in such conditions. He curved about to avoid trees and branches and falling leaves. He found himself flapping his wings and to his amazement gained height above the ground. Suddenly he was at the level of the nest again, with his parents looking on in pride.

He landed next to them on the creaking branch, and said, "I was sure I couldn't fly."

His mother looked at him fondly and said, "Aren't you glad you were wrong?"

In her 2006 book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, novelist Anne Lamott wrote a sentence that has reshaped the way I look at our friend Thomas. "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."

Thomas didn't doubt his friends' story about a resurrected Jesus. He was certain. He was certain they had it wrong, or that they had shared a common hallucination, or that they were intentionally deceiving him. John didn't tell us what he thought, actually. Clearly he didn't trust their story. In fairness, nobody telling the story of the resurrection in that first week got a receptive hearing. Mary Magdalene had, after all, told Jesus' closest disciples that she had seen the Lord – that's verse 18, which we read last week – and yet they were startled and frightened when Jesus turned up in verse 19, where we started today. Uncertainty was the condition of those frightened disciples, as Nancy Rockwell writes on her blog, *A Bite in the Apple*: "Doubt was part of the entire Easter picture, from Maundy Thursday right through Easter Day. At the Last Supper the disciples drew back from Jesus' foot washing – doubting his gesture, divining his meaning and shrinking from the changes to their own intentions, still intent on glory."

They were still intent on glory – the glory of a great revolution, a glory that Jesus so dramatically undercut by performing the task of a servant, of a person held in slavery that night. A glory that he further undercut as the night went on, refusing to resist the soldiers who came to arrest him, telling Simon Peter to put away his sword, even identifying himself freely.

We have been taught to see Jesus' resurrection as glorious. We tend to imagine a stunning sunrise blazing across the garden. Instead, the Easter morning stories are murky, unsettling. And the Easter evening story – Jesus' visit to his disciples behind that locked door – has almost a furtive feel. It took time for Jesus' closest friends to trust in this resurrection. It took these encounters with him, conversations with him, blessings from him. Thomas, as has been said by many (including me), asked for the same thing that they had already received.

My question is: Do we believe it yet?

I'm not asking about a simple yes or no of belief. I'm asking about something that goes deeper than that, something that John's language suggests in its original Greek, where the verb *pisteuo* means "trust" as much as "belief." Thomas didn't trust his friends' story. They probably hadn't much trusted Mary Magdalene's story when they heard it. They hadn't really trusted Jesus' demonstration of servant discipleship – or of crucified Messiah. They hadn't come to trust Jesus' new commandment: Love one another.

What do we trust?

As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "Belief in John is never a noun, but always a verb, and believing in Jesus is to be in relationship with Jesus." Strong relationships are trust relationships. Weak relationships are filled with suspicion. Trust relationships aren't based on certainty, though they may be strengthened by trust fulfilled. Weak relationships are based on a certainty that trust will not be kept.

It is, I'm afraid, unavoidable to drag national and political figures into this. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on January 28th that Russia would not start a war with Ukraine. Well. So much for that trust relationship. On Thursday New York *Times* reporters Alexander Burns and Jonathan Martin revealed that House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy had told fellow Republicans that he would urge Donald Trump to resign in the wake of the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol last year – yes, just last year. McCarthy issued a statement strongly denying it, and then Burns and Martin played a recording of McCarthy saying just what they'd quoted him saying in an interview with CNN that evening. Well.

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In contrast, as Karoline Lewis goes on to say, "Resurrection is relationship. A relationship that will never be broken, that will never be abandoned, that will never know separation, and will forever be. Think this is just a pie-in-the-sky promise? Let's pause and think about how much a relationship that will never end might mean. We live for and exist in relationships that are not life-giving, that are on the brink of dissolving, that will end, most certainly, because of every fault or no fault of our own."

How much better to place our trust in this relationship, the one with Jesus, the one that does not let us down?

It has been a long time since we gathered in this sanctuary for worship. For even longer, we have lived with the uncertainty induced by a global pandemic, an uncertainty marked by existential threat. Even now, with all the successes of medicine and science, I cannot say with certainty that we will all be well. And I really wish that, somewhere in the last two years, Jesus had come swooping down out of the sky with a glorious miraculous intervention that made it all better.

If you hadn't noticed, that didn't happen.

As a result, we are still living in uncertainty, and that means that we need to live in trust, and that means that we need to be trustworthy to one another. That's why we're masking. That's why we're making sure air is flowing. That's why we're not singing together as a group. I can't know with certainty – oh, dear, there's that word – that I'm not infectious. Viruses are sneaky. What I can do is act with consideration for your health and welfare. And for those you live with, and those you gather with, and those you meet casually along the way.

Do we believe in the resurrection of Jesus yet? Do we trust in Jesus' love, Jesus' first and last and always love? Do we trust enough to lay aside our certainty and trust in the unknowable? Do we have the courage to take on the same spirit of service and compassion that he showed? Do we have the faith to make the Church, the Body of Christ, recognizable as the one who washed the disciples' feet?

Let us believe, and trust, and act, and love.

Amen.