

# “What does belief look like?”

*John 20:19-31 and Acts 2:36-47*

April 12, 2026

The Reverend Allison R. Smith  
Market Square Presbyterian Church

---

The stories of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection appearances, are often either read or scrutinized compared to the accuracy of those events that happened long ago. In other words, when people engage with these stories the obvious question becomes, but did this really happen? Or how would they know that this is what happened? Or do we have any evidence or record of this outside of the Bible? And if you're a historian those are important questions to ask. But today I'm inviting you to come to these stories with a different lens. Not as historians but as part the community of people who inherited the promise of Christ's resurrection. Today's passages are part of our origin story, they're formative and they give us a sense of self identity, an understanding of what it means to be followers of the Way of Christ.

During Jesus' ministry, the disciples probably had a decent idea of what they were doing and who they were. They were disciples, learners at the feet of Rabbi Jesus. He taught from the law and the prophets. He resisted all that would threaten to choke out life.

But now things have changed. Starting with the story of Thomas, they've seen their Rabbi brutally killed, and they lock themselves away in that upper room. Hiding, afraid, the question "What do we do now?" seems to hang in the air around this story. Mary has told them her testimony, I have seen the Lord! But frankly, what are they supposed to make of that? And then he appears among them in the midst of their fear. He breathes peace on them. This is a mystical and yet embodied experience, it's powerful. Who can blame Thomas, who didn't share in it, for not taking them at their word. After all, none of them took Mary Magdalene at her word! What we see in the story of Thomas is a profound encounter with the risen Christ that reaffirms Thomas' identity. He professes his faith using simple words "My Lord, and my God." and then we are invited to enter

into this identity as those belonging to Christ as the narrative seems to break the fourth wall, look directly at us and extend to us a blessing "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

I talked a little bit last Easter about Thomas and the way that I think we often let these stories about belief lead us in unhelpful directions. We get hung up on trying really hard to believe doctrinally accurate things and forget to let ourselves be playful with these foundational identity stories about who we are. And one of the reasons for this is the word "believe." In our world the word believe can almost be synonymous with the word "think." For example, I could substitute one word for the other in the sentence, "What do you think happened? What do you believe happened?"

But in Greek the word for "Belief" is synonymous with the word "Trust"- "think" is a different word. And it points to a different question. Believe=think leads to the question "What is the most accurate record of events?" But if Believe = Trust, it starts pointing to the question "What do we do now?" It's the type of question that is forward looking, and not focused on what you think, but what you do, how you live. And it's this question that leads the disciples to trust that the cross did not have the last word.

That brings me to our passage from Acts today. Acts is a messy book. It tells the story of the early Christian community coming together in the days, weeks and years after the resurrection. And, spoiler alert, the early church wasn't perfect. There are stories in Acts that do not show those early believers in the best light. But the passage we read today shows the Church at its best. It shows the faith- the trust- the belief of those early disciples who in response to the question "What do we do now?" start gathering people in community. They start living boldly- throwing out the social constructs that divided people by status. In the face of the powerful Roman empire, who thought they could stamp them out with the force of the cross, they defiantly get their revenge by eating together, sharing things in common, rejecting the frameworks by which Rome kept power. Refusing to play by the rules the empire had set up, just as Jesus had taught them. This is what it means to believe, what it means to trust. Over the years we have gone farther and farther into locked rooms. Distrustful of each other, isolated from each other. This has come from fear, some of it not unjustified fear- but the fear that kept the disciples locked in that upper room wasn't unjustified either. We fear unrest, we fear being taken advantage of, we fear that people won't be on our side, won't hold our same values, we fear for the soul of our nation- are we becoming something we don't want to be?

Really let yourself think about what it would have meant for people to sell all their possessions and hold all things in common. It's a radical way of life that depends both on trust in God's provision and a deep trust of one another in the community. It's a trust that is very lacking in our society at the moment.

We are living through a time marked by incredible volatility. Just this past Tuesday, we all braced to see what might happen as our President threatened a genocidal attack on

Iran. The systems and checks that are supposed to provide stability are not working. And day by day we adapt and become more used to this volatility, the rhetoric of hate and violence becomes more normalized, and while we might not like it, we get less surprised, we name it less, we just get used to things being like this. We resign ourselves to the way things are.

Most of this Bible was written in times such as these. The stories of our faith provide guideposts and wisdom from our ancestors that help us stay grounded even when the ground itself feels shaky and unstable and uncertain. The soul crushing power of Rome that saw the Temple destroyed and the poor oppressed is the context for the early church. It is out of that turmoil that they believed in resurrection life. Christ could not be killed by the power of the cross- instead the power of the cross became the power to restore life. That image of cruelty, hate and power, was subversively changed into a symbol of life and hope by Christ's resurrection.

And so, my friends, "What do we do now?" Even more than 2000 years later we are reckoning with what the resurrection means for us. We are reckoning with those questions of our identity. We are yearning for that radical community of hope. Let's build here. Let's start with us. And let us believe- not think- but trust that when we live as resurrected people it will not go unnoticed. That others can be saved from the fear that is keeping them from life. That the world can be reconciled even now.