

Stories that Claim Us [OR God Sees Your Fear and Raises You by Grace]

John 20:19-31

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on April 24, 2022

My husband Rob has a group of friends from his hometown that stay in touch with each other. Life events and annual lake trips dot the calendar. There's one friend that keeps everyone going in the right direction. We laugh that it's because he's a retired army officer, so he's used to interdependence and complex logistics. I am somewhat envious of their life-long friendships. My story is littered with different homes, and towns, and schools. Even in the same town I switched schools between middle and high school so new friends were made. This is where the upside of social media makes a difference. Over the years, I've found people on social media from elementary, middle, and high school, and they've found me.

A couple of years ago, Ron Dawson, a friend from elementary school reached out because he was writing a memoir including stories from 5th and 6th grades. He wanted to check the story and use my name or an alias. We caught up with each other – cuz, you know, a lot's happened since 5th grade. We didn't really discuss my becoming a pastor. Just noted it and moved on. As social media goes, we've commented on each other's posts. This will come as a shock, I know, but some of my posts are religious. My Easter Sunday post was an icon of Jesus flashing a fancy icon hand sign that cast an Easter bunny shadow puppet. Last week, Ron messaged me and asked if he could interview me for his podcast.¹ He's doing a series about changes in his faith. The trendy word is deconstruction. His upbringing and adult faith experiences no longer fit his life experience. We talked via Zoom on Good Friday afternoon – a perfect time to talk about faith and lack of faith.

In that conversation, I mentioned something that Pastor John Pederson talked about in my first year as a pastor here. When people asked him about his faith, he would say that the Christian story is simply the one that claimed him. This is both a very Pastor Pederson and a very Lutheran thing to say – "...the story that claimed him." When you think about it, we all have a story or multiple stories that

¹ Ron Dawson, Dungeons 'n' Durags: One Black Nerd's Epic Quest of Self-Discovery and Racial Identity.
<https://dungeons-n-durags.com/podcast/>

claim us. Our family story, faith story, school story, work story, American story, human story, and more, usually lay their claims without a lot of self-awareness on our parts. Examining those stories takes time and energy, for sure, but it also takes courage. Because when you examine a story, ask questions about it, see if the story still fits with who you are now, you may find that the story has changed its claim on you.

Thomas is a solid example of a changing story. After the crucifixion, the disciples' fear had them on lock down. Rightly so after the trauma of Jesus' death and what could be next for them. Then Thomas' friends had an experience with the risen Jesus that he missed out on. Maybe he didn't trust their Jesus sighting because as a twin he had the look-alike prank down.² Who knows where he was when the resurrected Jesus showed up - food run, maybe? Anyway, Thomas wasn't there. Everything was still so fresh. Maybe he hadn't found his way back to the others after the chaos. It was still the same day that Mary Magdelene had just been at the empty tomb and saw Jesus, thinking he was the gardener until he said her name.³

Mary's morning (mourning?) encounter and the disciples' evening meeting with the risen Christ was the first Easter Sunday. Thomas had to wait a whole week, until the next Sunday, before HIS moment with the resurrected, wounded Jesus. That must have been a rough week, his friends crowing with confidence, claimed by a story that didn't yet include him. Makes me wonder what story claimed him that week. Was it doubt? Was it hope? Fear? All the above? It makes me wonder what stories claim us. Doubt? Hope? Fear? Capitalism? Celebrity-ism? All the above? Maybe a better question is, do we dare examine the stories that claim us? Week after week, Sunday to Sunday, we take baby steps on a life journey that often includes questions about faith. 12th century thinker, Anselm of Canterbury, called this "faith seeking understanding." Lutheran Christians are claimed by an origin story that includes thinking faith down to the last thought – changing our minds and wrestling with tough concepts. Repeatedly deconstructing ourselves within communities of faith as the risen Jesus repeatedly shows up in bread, wine, and each other to strengthen our faith and challenge our assumptions.

² David Peters, Vicar, St. Joan of Arc Episcopal Church, TX. Paraphrasing Jeremiah Griffin's sermon about Thomas
@dvdpeterson on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/dvdpeterson/status/1517219990809858050>

³ John 20:1-18

Deconstruction and reconstruction are not once and done – but a daily process of dying and rising in our baptisms, trusting that God’s promises are bigger than any of our questions or struggles.

People of great faith are inspiring. Like the early adopters in the faith – Mary Magdalene, Peter, the other disciples, and yes even Thomas – we have people among us who are convinced of the resurrection beyond a shadow of a doubt. Most of us don’t fall neatly into either full faith or no faith. That’s a false choice. Most of us are on a continuum, sometimes even depending on the time of day. For something as big and mysterious as the resurrection, it’s a good thing that the Easter season is 50 days. We need lots of time to swim in the mystery, struggle with what it means to trust God even if the resurrection story feels like a step too far from the reality of cross and tomb.

One of my seminary professors said that every faith argument plays a mystery card or two. To that I reply, “I see your mystery card and raise you a heresy.” Mystery cards, like the resurrection, are one thing. Any faith in any story relies on mystery cards. Whether that story is religious, or economic, or political, or scientific, there are assumptions, hypotheses, and mystery cards aplenty. Our Lenten Adult Forums on Faith, Science, and the Theology of the Cross, are just one recent example of how mystery functions in the world of science. Don Troike did a beautiful job leading us through the gifts, answers and limitations of science and faith. Very cool stuff.

Church offers us conversation partners who offer context, history, and compassion – kind of like the disciples did for Thomas. Anyway, on to heresies. Heresies are arguments that we make within a faith story that may not line up with accepted ideas or doctrine. This is super common. Mostly argued about by theology nerds. But sometimes the fear of heresy locks us into not thinking, or not engaging the mystery whatsoever. That’s no fun. Half the fun of the church is getting to wonder, wander, and ponder our way through what it means to be Jesus followers and the risen body of Christ. How do we get there if we don’t place a demand or two like Thomas did into the mix?

Thomas was open to the idea that he too could see Jesus’ resurrected wounds – as weird and icky as that sounds. He’d already experienced some pretty incredible

things to date – healings, exorcisms, Lazarus walking out of a tomb. Why not one more? The story that claimed these early siblings of faith is weird. It's the story of a lifetime. It's a story that takes courage to examine, question, and live into. Ultimately, though, it's Christ's story that claims, consoles, and connects us to each other and to God. God's longing sees your locked rooms and fears and raises you by grace. Alleluia and amen.

Song after the Sermon:

All Creation Sings Hymnal #1005 Ask the Complicated Questions

1. Ask the complicated questions,
do not fear to be found out;
for our God makes strong our weakness,
forging faith in fires of doubt.
2. Seek the disconcerting answers,
follow where the Spirit blows;
test competing truths for wisdom,
for in tension new life grows.
3. Knock on doors of new ideas,
test assumptions long grown stale;
for Christ calls from shores of wonder,
daring us to try and fail.
4. For in struggle we discover
truth both simple and profound;
in the knocking, asking, seeking,
we are opened, answered, found.

Text: David Bjorlin, b.1984; © 2018 GIA Publications, Inc.