

Do You Believe?

John 20:19-29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

It's hard for me to believe it's been almost 20 years since I moved here from the holy land. I'm not talking about Israel, but Memphis, TN where Elvis' home is known as Graceland.

I lived in Memphis three years before I visited that holy place. It was my 42 birthday which is significant because that's how old Elvis was when he died. I went with my friend Phil who is an Elvis fan plus, but not a true believer.

You may not know, but there are different kinds of Elvis fans. Regular fans like my neighbor Teresa grew up with and appreciate Elvis' music, but they don't consider the King divine. My friend Phil is a fan plus because he likes the music, and for fun he does an Elvis impersonation. He also built a shrine outside his FedEx office every year during Elvis Week with the memorabilia people donated.

Elvis Week marks the anniversary of the king's death. It's commemorated every August when the thousands of true believers flock to Graceland for a candlelight vigil. True believers are the most committed fans. They make pilgrimages to Graceland and have religious experience because for them Elvis has holy status.

Did you read the parallels between Jesus and Elvis in the weekly church e-news? Here are a few more.

- Jesus said: "Love thy neighbor." (Matt 22:39); Elvis said: "Don't be cruel." (RCA, 1956)
- Jesus is part of the Trinity; Elvis' first band was a trio.
- Jesus' entourage, the Apostles, had 12 members. Elvis' entourage, the Memphis Mafia, had 12 members.

- Jesus is a Capricorn. (born Dec.25) Elvis is a Capricorn. (born Jan. 8)
- Jesus was the Lamb of God. Elvis had mutton chop sideburns.
- Jesus was a carpenter. Elvis' favorite high school class was wood shop.
- Jesus lived in state of grace in a Near Eastern land. Elvis lived in Graceland in a nearly eastern state.

Given these connections, we Jesus fans can learn something from Elvis fans. There's something about their faith and devotion that's instructive.

When I made my pilgrimage to Graceland, Phil and I were standing in line waiting to get our tickets. I asked him, "How long did Elvis live here?" A woman behind us gasped. She was a true believer because she looked at me with shock and whispered, "We don't use the past tense here." She pointed to her t-shirt, which read: "Graceland, where Elvis LIVES."

It didn't matter she'd never seen Elvis or that he stopped walking the earth twenty-one years earlier. Elvis fans don't care. Without any proof, they believe he lives! Elvis lives, baby. The King lives.

It's a shame you and I don't live our lives with that kind of faith. I'm afraid most of us tend to be more like Thomas than a true believer at Graceland.

Our scripture reading is the familiar story of "doubting" Thomas. The disciples are locked behind closed doors after Jesus' crucifixion and death. Jesus comes and stands among them. When they see him, the disciples rejoice. But Thomas isn't present. Later the disciples tell Thomas what happened, he says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger ... in his side, I will not believe."

A week later, Thomas is with the disciples, Jesus appears again and invites Thomas to touch his wounds. When he puts his hand in Jesus' side - he knows. Thomas says, "My Lord and my God." Jesus says to him and all of us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

We've heard the story before, and we've lived it. We've all had times in our lives when we doubted, when we said to God, "Show me a sign! Give me some proof!" Maybe we were in a place of unbearable pain. Maybe we faced hardship with no answers. Maybe it was a time when God seemed silent. We've been there before. Like Thomas, we yearned for a sign from God.

It makes perfect sense. We live in a world where "proof" usually trumps faith. We send robots with cameras to the farthest ends of the universe so we can know what's out there. Anytime there is a wall bearing a sign "wet paint," we touch it just to be sure.

If only we had the faith of Elvis fans - a faith driven not by empirical proof - but by the voice in your heart. Finding that kind of faith can change your life. When you believe something in your heart, you begin to act on it in your life.

Just look at Elvis fans. They not only believe he lives; they act like he lives. They are constantly looking for the King, and sometimes they find him. There've been Elvis sightings all over the world: in a spa in Tokyo, in a Burger King in Michigan, and one woman who claimed that she found Elvis' image in a taco shell.

If you and I put even 1% of that kind of energy in looking for Jesus, we might actually find him. Maybe we'd find him in the eyes of a hungry child or the downcast gaze of a homeless stranger. Maybe we'd find him in the face of an enemy or the tears of a loved one with whom we are fighting. If you believe he lives, you'll act like he lives. You'll look for him and you'll find him.

Elvis fans believe he lives, and that's why they go out into in the world and share his message. Like my friend Phil, they play Elvis' music; they dress up as Elvis impersonators; they decorate their office or homes with Elvis memorabilia.

Elvis fans proudly proclaim the message of the King, which is an interesting contrast to the disciples in our story. Before Jesus appears in their midst, John tells us that the disciples are hiding behind locked doors. They aren't looking for Jesus. They aren't out in the world preaching the Good News. They aren't proclaiming the message of the King. They are hidden in fear and locked away in shame because they don't believe he lives.

I'm afraid many of us live a similar Christian life - a life with little or no faith in the risen Christ – a life with our hearts locked up and shut down.

A young woman grew up listening to Elvis, and sadly, she lived through an abusive childhood. But she said that she used daydream about Elvis as a means of escape. "He was my safe space," she said, "my little corner of heaven." Because she believed he lived, she honored him in her heart and that enabled her to find peace in the most difficult of places.

My prayer is that you and I would open our hearts to Jesus in the same way. When we honor the risen Christ in our hearts, we have our own safe space, our own little corner of heaven in which to rest and heal.

If you believe he lives - you'll act like he lives. Jesus' message is certainly a message of action. Elvis apparently felt the same way. Early on in his career, Elvis said, "Music and religion are similar - because both should make you wanna move."

Brothers and sisters, the gospel is a living, vibrant force that should make us want to get out and move, move around our valley, move towards each other in love and compassion, move towards bringing in the kingdom with justice and peace for all.

I don't know about you, but after Easter, I want a religion that makes me wanna move. I want a Savior that makes me wanna put on a sequin jump suit and sing. I want to believe in a Jesus that lives.

Don't let the doubts and fears of life shake your belief. Don't let your faith be driven by anything but the voice of your heart. Remember: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The good news is that if we believe he lives, our lives will change. We will search for and find him; we will proclaim his message; we will honor his spirit with ours.

Sometime this week, find a quiet moment, ask yourself, "Do you believe?" From the deepest parts of your heart, the answer will surely come: Christ lives, baby. The King lives. Now and forever. Amen.

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David Whiteley, Pastor

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church

Note: I am indebted to Rev. Susan Sparks' sermon Trust Jesus and Elvis for ideas and material in this sermon