

The Church of the Good Shepherd
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Second Sunday in Easter – April 7, 2024
John 20:19-31

Almighty God, we ask that you grant us, in this life, knowledge of your truth and, in the next, life everlasting. Amen.

Good morning! So, unless you've been living under a rock recently and entirely disconnected from all media, then you know there's going to be a solar eclipse tomorrow! In various locations around the world, people will experience the uncommon event wherein our planet, orbiting moon, and sun will line up perfectly, blocking the sun's life-giving light and creating the temporary experience of nighttime darkness during daylight hours.

While the moon will need nearly three hours to eclipse the sun, the exquisitely weird period of totality – when the sun is completely obscured but for its shimmering atmospheric corona and bright stars and planets pop out in the darkened sky – this lasts only a few minutes. In those precious minutes however, many have reported that it feels like everything is turned upside down and inside out. Birds, bees, and even plants might act weird... and humans certainly do.

In preparation for this unusual event, eclipse-fever has taken hold of this county. You can't check any media without being inundated in news, commentary, advice, predictions, and detailed maps of the path of totality. And much of this media-noise is not about the scientific phenomenon of solar eclipses, but rather about our own eclipse mania and wacky behavior. How many millions of people are traveling to locations along the path of totality, and the record Airbnb bookings. How cell service is anticipated to go down, and our anxiety about potential cloud coverage that day. I fully expect to hear of folks partying in weird costumes and the inevitable reports of mishaps that will come of it.

Businesses have also been busy attempting to cash in with space-themed specials. For example, Krispy Kreme is making a special Total Solar Eclipse Donut with a whole Oreo cookie in the center and SunChips is offering a limited-edition solar eclipse flavor: Pineapple Habanero and Black Bean Spicy Gouda. Yuck.

Why are we so obsessed? Only a minority of Americans will actually be able to experience the total solar eclipse, yet we are consumed with fascination. Certainly the fear of missing out is a factor, but there's something else going on here. I think we are so fascinated because rare events such as a total solar eclipse evoke the experience of awe.

Threaded through the personal accounts of prior eclipses there is the common theme of transcendent wonder. It seems that in such encounters, the human veil of delusion is briefly lifted, and one may encounter the deep truth of reality. The humbling reality that we are mortal, fragile creatures. And that our very existence is dependent on forces, people, and situations over which we have at best very limited control. This is a deeply profound experience to which we are inexplicably drawn even though it evokes fear. This is AWE.

All this brings me to our Gospel lesson today from John and that poor, poor Doubting Thomas. As I've preached before, I feel such pity for Thomas as there is so much more to him and his discipleship than this one instance of supposed "doubt". Thomas was one of Jesus' most faithful disciples. He wags unafraid of the dangers of following Jesus and fearless to ask the difficult questions that most certainly were on the minds of the other disciples.

I truly believe that in our lesson today, Thomas was not "doubting" Jesus' resurrection so much as yearning for his own intimate experience of the risen Lord. He's merely asking for what all the other disciples had already experienced. He wants to experience the same transcendent wonder

that comes from the encounter with the impossible: to see, hear, and touch the resurrected Christ. An encounter that turns everything upside down and inside out.

If anything, Thomas is no better or worse than the others who also didn't believe the crazy accounts of the empty tomb, the angels, and Mary's story of her meeting the resurrected Jesus. Second-hand testimony was not enough for them either. Only the personal encounter with the resurrected Christ was what led them to believe. And once Jesus did appear to him, Thomas immediately makes the chief confession of Jesus in John's gospel, declaring him "my Lord" and "my God." Rather than being a model of doubt and fickle faithlessness, I see Thomas as a model of discipleship – or, more accurately, of how one becomes a disciple. For most of us, discipleship requires the faith that only comes from an encounter with Christ – an experience of God present and alive in our lives.

As evidenced in our gospels and in our current time's eclipse fever, humans are seem to be inexplicably drawn to the experience of awe and transcendent wonder. Earlier this week, I read an actual non-eclipse-related article about a researcher who has spent the past two decades studying awe. A psychologist at Berkely, Dacher Kiltner says that awe is distinct from joy or fear, and that it is not merely an emotional experience but also a neurological one. Studies show that the experience of awe affects the human nervous system in a unique way, deactivating the region of the brain where all the self-representational processes take place, such as the ceaseless thinking about myself, my time, my goals, my checklist. All that quiets down because awe activates our vagus nerve, which helps us to open up to things bigger than ourselves. And Kiltner helpfully explained that finding awe and wonder can be as simple as pausing and noticing the world around us.

Well, my experience in embodied life is that this is harder than it sounds. Our gift of human self-awareness usually gets in the way. But finding awe and wonder can be much easier when we are knocked to our metaphorical knees by such astounding weirdness as a total solar eclipse or an encounter with the resurrected Christ!

In moments such as these, the blinders of our compulsive self-awareness and delusions of control fall away. And we are then in the presence of the very truth that turns everything upside down and inside out – the truth of our mortal fragility, our dependence on God, and our interdependence with all of creation. While these are often frightening and deeply uncomfortable experiences, we are drawn to them. Like the disciple Thomas, we want our own direct encounter with our risen Lord. And like Thomas, it is not so much that we lack faith, but rather desperately want our own experience with truth.

While writing this sermon, I realized I had an old song playing in my head –the 1983 power ballad by Bonnie Tyler, "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Remember that one? Beyond the fact that I thought this silly song might be a funny way to underscore my rather whimsical argument that a solar eclipse is somehow like Thomas' encounter with the risen lord, I was surprised to realize that it actually provides a wonderful metaphor for the Gospel lesson!

In case you can't remember, "Total Eclipse of the Heart" is actually a duet in which a lover sings of her yearning for her beloved who is no longer there. To each of her petitions of heartache and longing, her beloved gently responds singing "turn around." Her beloved invites her to realize that he has always been there, always been available to her, if only she opened her bright eyes and turned around.

Does this sound familiar? Thomas, bereft at the loss of Jesus, yearns for the intimate encounter with him that the other disciples had experienced. I can imagine him, like the song's lover, singing of his yearning to encounter his beloved Lord and God, and the resurrected Jesus responding gently "turn around."

OK, so now you are probably wondering did she really just set our Gospel lesson and our instinctual human desire for intimate communion with God in the context of a cheesy pop song

from the 1980's? Oh, yes, I did. Because sometimes it is good to hear familiar stories in new and unexpected ways, so that perhaps we may hear them again for the first time. And this isn't so ridiculous a comparison as it may sound, for it turns out that the Greek word for repentance can be understood as "to undergo a profound change" or "to turn in a new direction." "Repent and return to the Lord!" being the prophets' eternal cry. Turn around.

Taken together, this song, our eclipse fever, and our Gospel story reveal truth with a capital T. That – despite all evidence to the contrary – encounters with the living presence of God in creation is indeed available to us, should we merely desire it enough to stop, set down our self-absorption, and "turn around."

Amen.