

# AColyte

Easter 2017

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College

Zombies,

Halitosis,

and

America

(let's talk about Easter)

AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

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CONGRATULATIONS  
TO THE 2017-18  
SALLIE MAJORS RELIGIOUS LIFE INTERNS

Jake Davis  
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Deric McCurry  
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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

The top of the roller coaster  
and the mouth of the tomb  
April 2017

*Music in the corridor howls like a hungry trance.  
Bones and feathers on the floor, maybe we'll all just dance.  
Shadows in the living room, whispers of circumstance.  
Somewhere on the open road even the dead still dance, we dance.*

--Animal Liberation Orchestra,  
"Dead Still Dance"

*Back to back,  
Belly to belly  
At the Zombie Jamboree*  
-- Lord Intruder (Winston O'Conner),  
"Zombie Jamboree"

*Tell me the truth, what are you living for?  
Tell me the truth, why are you here?  
If you can't make a little good noise,  
Tell me, what are you doing here?*

–John Gorka,  
“Good Noise”

I got to play with Bad Hat Wednesday night.

They are a band comprising Austin College professors and staff members Brett Boessen, Nate Bigelow, Rebecca Hardegree, Amanda Kisselle, and Hunt Tooley. They were nice enough to let me sit in as they played in the Pouch Club as part of the AC Cares AIDS Quilt program.

The AIDS quilt program is a time of celebration and remembrance of individuals and families whose lives have been touched by HIV/AIDS.

Every Spring we get together, raffle off some prizes to raise money for the Simbardenga Newstart Children's Home—an AIDS Orphanage in Harare, Zimbabwe, and try to make some good noise.

Of course, it's a bittersweet time.

The atmosphere is always festive, but many of us end up thinking and reminiscing about friends who have died.

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We sang these words Wednesday night:

*Together, we've learned not to wait for tomorrow  
And together, we've learned that some pain never ends.  
But, together, we see more than heartache and sorrow.  
So the candle still burns and the pain never wins.*

That's a song about what we were up to in that room:

- acknowledging the pain that remains in the lives of families and friends who have lost someone to AIDS
- but also determining to remember and celebrate those lives and never give in to hopelessness and despair even in the face of such profound loss.

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After we finished playing, I spent some time talking with my friends Gene and Judy Kincaid. They are usually present at these events.

Their son Kirk died in 1992.

I try to talk to them whenever I see them. We've been friends for a long time.

But Gene surprised me Wednesday night. (More about that below)

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For at least the last 15 years, I have sung the Rolling Stones song "Dead Flowers" at the AIDS Quilt show.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_emq\\_NzO7H8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_emq_NzO7H8)

Years ago, there was a gentleman named William who came to the AIDS Quilt program. He was an AIDS patient and already facing many challenges related to the disease by the time we met him.

When we started playing "Dead Flowers" he asked if he could sing with us.

And he did.

It was fun.

William died a few years ago.

I always talk about him before I play "Dead Flowers."

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Wednesday, after we were finished playing, I sat down with Gene and Judy to have a little pizza and conversation.

Gene told me stories about William that I had never heard before.

Some were sad.

Some were beautiful.

Some involved Gene & Judy's son Kirk.

William was an interesting guy with a kind of goofy, snaggle-toothed grin.

I think about him sometimes.

So, this week I've learned new stories about departed friends.

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I get a lot of email from the Library of Congress.

Through the Library 's "Poetry 180" project, I get a poem in my inbox every weekday between Labor Day and Memorial Day ([www.LOC.gov](http://www.LOC.gov)).

Here's what was waiting for me Thursday morning:

*At night the dead come down to the river to drink.  
They unburden themselves of their fears,  
their worries for us. They take out the old photographs.  
They pat the lines in our hands and tell our futures,  
which are cracked and yellow.  
Some dead find their way to our houses.  
They go up to the attics.  
They read the letters they sent us, insatiable  
for signs of their love.  
They tell each other stories.  
They make so much noise  
they wake us  
as they did when we were children and they stayed up  
drinking all night in the kitchen.  
—Susan Mitchell,  
"The Dead"*

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So I sang about Dead Flowers,  
and learned new stories about dead friends,  
and had a poem called "The Dead" in my inbox Thursday morning.

I can take a hint.

It's time to talk about Easter.

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My favorite Easter story starts like this:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week,

"That day" is Easter.

and the doors of the house where the disciples had met  
were locked for fear of the Jews,

This story is from the Gospel of John and—before we go any further—we need to recognize that these “disciples” were not afraid of all Jews.

Unfortunately, for many centuries, this passage has been misused to justify Anti-Semitism—to devalue and discriminate against persons of the Jewish faith.

That’s crap.

The disciples in this story were understandably worried about the particular Jews who had arrested, convicted, and executed Jesus earlier in the week. It’s just those guys—not all Jews—who are causing anxiety among Jesus’ disciples as this story begins.

As we regularly learn at Austin College, it’s all about context.

The author of the Gospel of John had kind of a bad taste in his mouth about a particular group of Jews who had kicked him out of their synagogue when he converted to Christianity. Some scholars speculate that part of what motivated John to write his gospel—his version of the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—was his desire to justify his actions to the folks in the synagogue who ejected him out for being Christian.

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So we’ve got these ten disciples in this locked room on a Sunday night.

They are afraid that the people who had arrested and executed their friend Jesus were going to come after them next.

The disciple Judas Iscariot was not in the room with them. Obviously, he wouldn’t have been welcome in that room after he had sold Jesus out to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver. He was also dead by this time.

The disciple Thomas wasn’t there either. We don’t know why.

Jesus came and stood among them and said,  
"Peace be with you."

So—just to be clear— now John is telling us that the guy that the ten disciples watched die on Friday has now showed up to hang out with them on Sunday!

Dead on Friday, still dead on Saturday, dropping by the locked room on Sunday.

As my fourteen-year-old son would tell you: that's **Zombie** behavior.

here's a quick **Zombie** fix—along with some '90s fashion flashbacks:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqOPkEGs9K0>

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Even though it's familiar to many of us, it's important for us not to read this story through a stained-glass lens, as though this kind of thing happens all the time.

Do you have any stories about people you have known personally who were dead and buried and then dropped by to hang out?

It's an astonishing, unprecedented, unimaginable development.

It's a **Zombie Jamboree**.

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And **Zombie Jesus** tells the ten guys, "Peace be with you."

I'm guessing that "Peace" was probably not the primary emotion in that room that night.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.  
Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

This is an important detail.

The disciples in this story do not rejoice and recognize Jesus until *after* he shows them his hands and his side.

That's all **Doubting Thomas** is gonna ask for later. He'll just want the same experience that the other ten have already had.

Jesus said to them again,  
"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Again with the "Peace be with you."

*Zombie Hippie Jesus?*

It's important to note here what Jesus doesn't say.

He doesn't say, "I hope peace will be with you" or "If you're lucky, peace might characterize your life together."

He just makes the statement: "Peace be with you."

I think John might want us to think about Genesis 1 when we get to this place in the story.

Genesis 1:1-3

1:1 In the beginning when God created <sup>a</sup> the heavens and the earth,

2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God <sup>b</sup>swept over the face of the waters.

3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

In that first chapter of Genesis, God creates by speaking.

Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, and 26 all contain the phrase, "And God said..."

In Genesis 1, God speaks and things come to pass.

I think John might be suggesting to us in this story that Jesus creates peace among the disciples when he says "Peace be with you."

We have to look at a few more verses before I can tell you why I think that.

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

Again—although some of us tend to hear angels singing in the background when we read this verse because it's *HOLY SCRIPTURE*—this is actually kind of gross.

Zombie Jesus *breathed* on them? Ewwwwwww.

If you think "Morning Breath" is bad, imagine "Three Days in the Tomb Breath!"

I think John is telling this story in a way intended to remind us of some other things we've learned in the Bible.

The Hebrew word "Ruach" and the Greek word "Pneuma" both mean "Spirit" and "Breath" and "Wind"

I think John wants us to think about Genesis 2:7 when we read this part of the story.

Genesis 2:7

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground



And breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,  
and the man became a living being.

Here in John 20:22, the Risen Christ breathes and the Church comes to life as his Body (see Paul's "body of Christ" language in 1 Corinthians 12).

That's the "halitosis" part.

Wind. Spirit. Breath.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;  
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This is a different picture of the origin of the church than we get in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 16, Jesus gives authority to an individual:

Matthew 16:17-19

**17** And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

**18** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

**19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven

But this same authority—the "Keys of the Kingdom"—is given to the entire community in John 20:22

*By the way, many of you may have seen a T-Shirt around campus this year that says,*

***VOTE FOR PEDRO.***

***JESUS DID.***

*Matthew 16:18*

*ACTivators led three youth retreats this year with the theme: "The Gospel According to Napoleon Dynamite." Those t-shirts, which we gave away at those retreats, are based on the idea that Jesus "votes for Pedro" in Matthew 16:18 when he says, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."*

Back to John 20:

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve,  
was not with them when Jesus came.

We don't know why.

I don't think it matters. Except if he had been there we wouldn't really have a story.

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."

"Yeah, right."

"You people must have been in the communion wine."

"I might have been born at night, but it wasn't last night."

Remember, back there in verse 20, the other 10 disciples didn't "rejoice" until after they'd seen Jesus' hands and side.

Thomas is just asking for that same experience here in verse 25.

But watch what happens as we move from verse 25 to verse 26.

A week later his disciples were again in the house,  
and Thomas was with them.

The most profound moment in this story takes place in that space between verses 25 and 26.

When verse 25 ends, there's not unanimity in the Church about whether or not Jesus had been raised from the dead. When I was in seminary, they told us that was a pretty big deal theologically.

But in that space between verse 25 and verse 26 you've got ten disciples who are certain that Jesus has risen; that, although he was clearly dead, he's not dead any more.

And you've got one disciple, Thomas, who's just not buying that.

Yet verse 26 says, "A week later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them."

The disciples didn't agree.

But they were together anyway

The Ten hadn't kicked Thomas out because he didn't believe the right things.

And Thomas hadn't left even though he disagreed with 91% of his fellow disciples.

***THAT'S*** what the "peace of Christ" looks like.

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After receiving the gift of Peace from the Risen Christ the disciples realize that it's more important to stay together and care for each other than to agree with each other.

This is the evidence that when he keeps saying "Peace be with you" earlier in the story Jesus is *creating* peace among the disciples.

*This is why ACtivators this year are also running around in lilac comfort-color t-shirts that say :*

*LOVING > RIGHT*

*on the front and*

*It's more important to be loving  
than it is to be right.*

*on the back.*

In the last analysis, I don't think this is a story about doubt.

I think it's a story about peace.

And the story goes on.

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said,  
"Peace be with you."

Zombie Hippie Jesus.

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."

This is the famous moment in this story.

We need to pause right here and think for a minute about what it means to “believe.”

And, to do that, we to talk about America.

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Just under 241 years ago, a left-handed redhead walked into a stuffy room in Philadelphia with a blank piece of paper. After a few days, he came out with one of the most famous and influential phrases ever written in the English language.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident,  
that all men are created equal...*

As you know, a few days after Thomas Jefferson wrote that phrase, the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, including the line about equality and self-evident truth. And the rest, as they say, is history.

We all learned about the Declaration of Independence in school. It is rightly regarded as possibly the most significant document in American history.

It’s good that we know it and—despite our ongoing political debates—we still believe it.

“All men are created equal.”

We don’t always live up to that standard—we never have. But we’ve never been able to completely ignore it either. As a culture—on the whole—we’ve worked hard in the last two and a half centuries to construct a society that is fair and respectful of every individual.

We’ve got a long way to go.

But we keep trying.

Think about how Jefferson’s sentence starts:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident,*

“Self-evident” truth is truth that doesn’t require proof. It can’t be proven.

Jefferson and the Continental Congress did not offer equations or formulas or statistics to *prove* that all men are created equal. They simply declared that notion of universal equality to be true and then set about building a society that presumed that it was true.

It became true because they decided to live in a world where it was true.

We know the story of Thomas Jefferson and the Continental Congress.

We also know the story of the Civil War.

And the Women's Suffrage Movement.

And the internment of US citizens of Japanese origin in the 1940s.

And the Civil Rights Movement.

And Black Lives Matter.

And all the arguments that Americans continue to have about what's fair.

But it's important to remember that the whole huge story always *presumes* that the Declaration's statement that "all men are created equal" is still true and still relevant.

We don't debate about whether that statement is true or not.

We take it for granted.

Americans *believe* in the Declaration of Independence.

We live together and act and make meaning in the context created by those words. We don't look for or expect proofs or formulas or statistics or equations to justify our actions. We simply live in that story--the story created by those words.

I think that's a good way to talk about what it means to *believe in* something.

To believe in something is to live in its story.

To "believe" in something is to decide to live in a world where certain things are true.

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Now let's go back to the Bible.

When Jesus tells Thomas, "Do not doubt, but believe," he's inviting Thomas to live in a world where Easter is true.

And Thomas goes there.

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."

Could that mean "Blessed are those who have chosen to live in a world where Easter is true even if they haven't actually touched my hands and my side"?

I think so.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,  
which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to **believe** that  
Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,  
and that through **believing** you may have life in his name.

This is John saying,

"I didn't write about everything Jesus ever did. I wrote these stories to invite you to live in a world where Easter is true;

- a world where it's more important to be loving than to be right;
- a world where sacrifice, service, forgiveness, and grace are part of the whole truth;
- a world where death is real but it's not the not the last word."

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With its Zombie references and halitosis moments, this is a story that invites us all

- to accompany each other in all our magnificent diversity (no matter what we believe about Jesus);
- as we seek to live peacefully together
- in a world where Easter is true.

Until next time, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Still living with Kirk and William and Don Rodgers and Jack Pierce—  
Just in a New Way,

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain

## ONE MORE THING:

Speaking of “living peacefully together,” this happened at Austin College on February 2:

Dozens of Austin College students, faculty, and staff stood together in Wynne Chapel, held hands, and with the leadership of Muslim Students Association President **Rija Soofi**, read the following statement:

Because we are, and have always been, formally related to the Presbyterian Church,  
**Austin College values and takes seriously the religious commitments, and practices of all members of our community—students, faculty, and staff.**

Because we value personal growth,  
**Austin College strives to encourage, assist, and enable interested students to participate in religious communities they find to be meaningful and authentic.**

Because we value justice,  
**Austin College resists all efforts based on religious identity or nationality to limit the ability of any person to participate fully in the life of our institution.**

Because we value community,  
**Austin College encourages and fosters respectful interaction between community members from various religious traditions as well as those with no religious tradition.**

Because we value participation in community life,  
**The students, faculty, and staff of Austin College celebrate and affirm religious, cultural, and international diversity.**

This is us.  
**Diverse and united.**

#HappyEaster  
#Loving>Right

