

# AColyte

April 17, 2020

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



Peas, Bee, with Ewe

## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Day 32 of the RooMote Situation

200 days before the Presidential election

In a room where the doors are locked

Thinking I probably shouldn't have any more coffee

April 17, 2020 (the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the day I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister)

*It's the weight of the world  
But it's nothing at all  
Light as a prayer, and then I feel myself fall  
You got to give me a minute  
Because I'm way down in it  
And I can't breathe so I can't speak  
I want to be strong and steady, always ready  
Now, I feel so small, I feel so weak  
Anxiety  
How do you always get the best of me?  
--Jason Isbell*

*Back to back,  
Belly to belly –  
It's a Zombie Jamboree  
--Rockapella*

*Yeah, yeah, yeah  
Peace to the world  
--Los Lobos*

In my new Roomote Pandemic routine, I tend to turn on the news every morning as soon as I wake up.

I try to stay aware of my surroundings and pay attention to things that might directly or indirectly affect me, my family, or Austin College. I definitely learn useful things by reading, watching, or listening to the news.

But there's a cost.

Lately, and understandably, to listen to the news is to be almost constantly reminded of the coronavirus;

- the **grief** of thousands of families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19;
- the **fear** that we all have as we try hard not to get sick or make others sick;
- the **disorientation** of facing unprecedented circumstances and behaving in new ways as we try to flatten the curve by social distancing; and
- the **uncertainty** about how long all this will last and about what our lives will look like when we get beyond this season.

I don't really blame the news media for focusing on those things.

The grief, fear, disorientation, and uncertainty that I hear or read about are relevant and real.

It's just where we are right now.

Grief.

Fear.

Disorientation.

Uncertainty.

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We've got all of that in #ROONation.

There's **grief** for the parts of this Spring Semester that we've lost. Even though there's this whole epic, true, heroic story about the way AC students, faculty, and staff have figured out how to continue move forward and make progress in this time of social distancing, we've lost a lot. We had dreams and plans and expectations that simply will not come to pass. And we're grieving those things. As we should.

Some of us are facing the much more profound grief that comes with the realization that the current financial situation will mean that some students will not be able to continue their studies at AC. We're working hard to minimize those situations, but it's unlikely that they can all be avoided.

And that's excruciating.

There are also all sorts of things in this moment that many of us are legitimately afraid of.

What if I get sick?

What if my parents or grandparents get sick?

What if I make my parents or grandparents sick?

What if there's not enough money?

Will I learn what I need to learn?

There's real and legitimate **fear** in our individual lives and in our life together.

And we're all **disoriented** as we try to figure out how to function in this new context. Of course that's true in remote classes. Shifting to online learning was, and still is, disorienting. It's not like flipping a light switch and all of a sudden everything is cool.

But it's also disorienting to apply for grad school in this context.

- Or to look for a job;
- Or make plans to move to a new city;
- Or figure out where you can live in Sherman next year.

It's disorienting to go back to living with your parents and siblings after you have been in Sherman;

- Or try to maintain friendships;
- Or participate remotely in the fulfilling extra-curricular activities that we find energizing.

It feels like lots of what was best about our life together here has been taken away.

Those things might come back.

We hope they're not gone forever.

But we don't know for sure.

## **Uncertainty.**

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I've never been the pastor of a church.

I've done campus ministry at Austin College for 27 years and I was Associate pastor at NorthPark Presbyterian Church in Dallas for 6 ½ years before I came here.

One of the things that means is that I have often been asked to be the guest preacher at some church on the Sunday after Easter. In my trade, that's affectionately known as "Associate Pastor Sunday." Pastors work hard during Holy Week, and it's not uncommon for them to invite somebody else to prepare and preach the sermon on the Sunday after Easter.

In the last 30+ years, I have often been that guy.

One of the things that means is that, through the years, I have spent a lot of time and energy thinking and writing and preaching about John 20:19-31. That's the "Doubting Thomas" story. It's the lectionary Gospel reading for the first Sunday after Easter every 3 years.

It's a great story. And I guarantee you I can write more words about that story than you want to read right now.

But this year, I'm noticing something new as I think about John 20:19-31. Something I've never really focused on before.

I'm thinking there might be some particular insights in the this story as we all face this period of grief, fear, disorientation, and anxiety.

It's a great story.

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

*"[T]hat day" was Easter.*

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

The doors were locked because Jesus's disciples were afraid that the people who had just arrested, convicted, and executed their friend were going to come after them next. They were legitimately worried.

"[F]or fear of the Jews" refers to the particular Jewish leaders who had arrested Jesus and turned him over to Pilate and the Roman authorities.

The ten disciples in this locked room were afraid of those Jews, not all Jews.

Unfortunately, through the centuries some small-minded and xenophobic Christians have used this passage to justify anti-Semitic behavior. That's a complete and utter misunderstanding of this passage.

By the way, there are only ten of Jesus' twelve disciples in that room when this story starts. We know why Judas was no longer welcome there – you know, the whole "betrayal" thing. But, as we'll learn in a few verses, Thomas wasn't there either. And we don't know why. Doesn't matter.

So, already in the first half of this verse, we've got **grief** as the disciples mourn the death of their friend Jesus and **fear** as they worry that they will also be arrested.

*Jesus came and stood among them and said,*

Hold on.

This is John 20:19. But Jesus *died* back in John 19:30.

These guys had all watched Jesus die on the cross the night before last.

Now it's true that, just before this story, in John 20:1-18, Peter and John had gone to Jesus' tomb and found it empty and Mary Magdalene had actually talked to Jesus. She had even told them what he had said to her.

So there is great temptation for all of us who are familiar with this story to just go gliding right past this little detail as though that kind of thing happens all the time.

It's true that Peter and John and certainly Mary had set the stage for this moment for the other disciples.

But still, this is a Dead Man Walking showing up in a locked room.

I'm pretty sure Jesus showing up in their locked room would have been **disorienting**—even after the disciples had already heard from Mary that Jesus had talked to her. I doubt they had a plan for interacting with Jesus just then.

That might explain why Jesus does what he does next.

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

I'm pretty sure Peace would not have been the dominant feature of that room that night. But that's what Jesus says.

**20** *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.*

Yep. It just keeps getting weirder.

Now this Zombie guy who they knew was dead is saying, "Check out my wounds."

Seriously. Pause for a second and think about what it would have been like to be in that room.

You've got **grief** for your executed friend who you watched die.

You've got **fear** because you're afraid the same people who got him are coming for you.

Then you've got the totally **disorienting** experience of that dead guy showing up in your locked room.

And apparently – and quite understandably – the disciples were **uncertain** about exactly what was going on.

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

The disciples don't "rejoice" until after they touch Jesus and are convinced that this really is the same guy who they had been following and listening to and learning from for the last few years.

They don't rejoice until after they touch his hands and his side.

Before that, they had been uncertain.

Mark that.

***21** Jesus said to them again,  
"Peace be with you."*

Again with the "Peace" stuff.

Jesus is beginning to sound like a hippie.

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

This is the moment in John's version of the Jesus story when those guys stop being disciples and become apostles.

A disciple is a student; a follower; and learner.

An apostle is someone who is sent with a mission.

John is foreshadowing.

The disciples are about to be given an assignment.

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

It's not enough that the Zombie guy shows up in a locked room full of terrified people, now he's intentionally *exhaling* all over them.

That behavior wouldn't fly in a pandemic.

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

Interesting.

This is Jesus giving a certain kind of assignment and authority to those ten disciples.

He's basically saying, "Now I want y'all to live a certain way in the world. I want y'all to take seriously the things that you've seen me take seriously; to embody grace, hope, courage, and self-sacrifice like I did."

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

We don't know why. But this would have been a shorter and less interesting story if Thomas had been with the others.

**25** *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."*

It's hard to blame Thomas.

All he's asking for is the very same experience that the other ten had back in verse 20.

But watch what happens next.

You could make the case that one of the most profound moments in this whole story takes place between the end of verse 25 and the beginning of verse 26.

**26** *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."*

Think about that.

For a week, there was not agreement among the disciples about whether or not Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Of course, the ten who had seen him were completely convinced that Jesus had risen.

But Thomas just couldn't go there. He thought his partners had were in some kind of fantasy world.

Thomas in verse 25 reminds me of a line from a James McMurtry song:

*You wish so hard you're scaring me.*

And yet as verse 26 begins, all eleven disciples **were together anyway**.

In this context in which they

- shared experiences of grief, fear, disorientation, and uncertainty
- but did not have the same experience of interacting with the risen Christ

the disciples had **decided** to stay together.

The ten didn't kick Thomas out even though he didn't believe the same thing about Jesus that they did.

And Thomas hadn't left on his own even though he thought his friends had succumbed to pure wishful thinking.

I'm struck by that decision they all seem to have made to stay together.

I think maybe the "Peace" that Jesus keeps talking about in this story is evident in the disciples' recognition that there are more important things than agreeing with each other.

I wonder if the Peace of the Risen Christ involves the recognition that the most important thing to do in the face of grief, fear, disorientation, and uncertainty is to decide to stay together.

***27 Then [Jesus] said to Thomas,  
"Put your finger here and see my hands.  
Reach out your hand and put it in my side."***

This is Thomas finally having the same experience that the other ten had back in verse 20.

But Jesus adds an extra line when he's interacting with Thomas,

***27 Then [Jesus] 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."***

That's the line that has traditionally been regarded as the sort of punch line for this whole story. It's why this is called the Doubting Thomas story.

"Do not doubt but believe."

Through the years, lots of well-intentioned Christians have written and spoken and preached millions and millions of words about the dangers of doubt. It still happens all the time.

I'm not one of those Christians.

Doubt in the form of critical thinking, of asking questions and seeking to transcend one's limited perspective, is at the center of our enterprise here at Austin College. I don't think Jesus is discouraging Thomas from critical thinking.

I think Jesus is calling Thomas to live in a world where Easter is true.

When he says, "Do not doubt but believe" I think Jesus is inviting and encouraging Thomas--even as he faces grief, fear, disorientation, and uncertainty--to **decide** to live and think and act in a world where those things are not the whole truth.

*28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*29 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."*

That's about all of us who haven't touched the hands and the side of the risen Christ but who have decided to live together in a world that contains more than just grief, fear, disorientation, uncertainty, and death.

I think "Do not doubt but believe" is a call to decide to live and think and act in world where the whole truth also includes grace, hope, self-sacrifice, and courage.

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*Until we get a viable vaccine  
this unprecedented outbreak will not be overcome  
in grand, sweeping gesture,  
rather only by the collection of individual choices  
our community makes in the coming months.*

*--Jonathan Smith,*

Lecturer in Epidemiology of Microbial Diseases and Global Health  
at the Yale University School of Public Health

**"...only by the collection of individual choices..."**

In this season of grief, fear, disorientation, and uncertainty, I think it might be valuable for us to follow the example of all eleven disciples in the Doubting Thomas story and make some decisions.

At this particular time, each of us all of us have the opportunity, and the duty, to make the conscious decision

- to live together in peace,
- to continue to execute and endure social distancing
- to practice patience,
- to stay together (remotely but really)
- and to care for each other.

We can make that happen.

We can expect and embody grace, hope, self-sacrifice, and courage.

In our individual lives and in our life together.

Right now.

Today.

Tomorrow.

And into the future.

Let's do that.

Let's decide again to be who we know we are – people who are prepared to do everything we can do for each other and for the world.

This is not easy.

But it's our time.

Let's rise to it.

Together.

For as long as it takes.

Because that's how we roll in #ROONation.

Until Next Time, I remain,

Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Glad that You Are One of the Ones with Us as We Face this Challenge,

JOHN WILLIAMS

Chaplain

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## **TWO MORE THINGS -- More Zoom Invitations**

### **SUNDAY NIGHT ZOOM COMMUNION**

All interested Austin College students, faculty, staff, and alumni are invited to participate in a Zoom Communion Worship Service at 6:00pm this Sunday night. In that service, participants will pray, sing, and read Scripture together. The service will also include an opportunity for participants to share the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Interested participants will need to secure their own communion elements (bread and wine/grape juice). After the reading and proclamation of the Word, an Invitation to the Lord's Table, a Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, and Words of Institution spoken by the Chaplain, participants may partake of bread and wine/grape juice in their own locations in the context of this unusual worship service and this unusual time.

Here's the Zoom Invitation:

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://austincollege.zoom.us/j/212896669?pwd=dDJ3cGFRCzhocWFBOU1LZE4vSUMwUT09>

### **TUESDAY NIGHT BIBLE STUDY**

Interested students are invited to participate in a Zoom Bible Study every Tuesday at 5:30pm. In that Bible Study, participants study and discuss the Scripture passage that will be at the center of the Austin College communion worship service on the following Sunday. This Bible Study discussion is the first step in the planning of the following Sunday's communion service.

Here's the Zoom Invitation for Austin College Tuesday Night Bible Study.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://austincollege.zoom.us/j/341714234?pwd=bStnYkRnTVZ3YWYyZ2ZjUz1GUUJaUT09>

Meeting ID: 341 714 234

Password: 527176