

RISING STRONG: Rising from Skepticism

John 20:19-31

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/rising-from-skepticism/

I.

If you follow me on social media, you know I enjoy hammocking. I often post photos from my hammock time – alone or with family or friends like my sweet friend, Grace, on the left.

“Hammocking,” or “mocking” as some call it, is the act of setting up a hammock anywhere by yourself, with a friend, or even several people, like the photo on the right of my nephew and several Boy Scouts doing what is called “hammock stacking.” Mocking is simply hanging out, napping, relaxing, reading, and shooting the breeze while swinging in the breeze in your respective hammocks.

But I’ve not always been one who mocks. It began for me in 2018 on a camping trip in Arkansas with friends. After arriving at our campsite and pitching our tents, my friend, Heather Feeler, a long-time mocker herself, strung her olive-green hammock between two nearby trees, gently swaying under a canopy of leaves.

And it looked marvelous. It looked peaceful, comfortable, and restful. She looked like she didn’t have a care in the world, held in Mother Nature’s arms, at one with the trees and all the woodland creatures.

Always eager to invite people into the fun, Heather rolled out of her hammock and offered it to me. I, too, wanted to be at one with the trees and all the woodland creatures. But there was a problem, you see: I didn’t trust hammocks. I hadn’t had a bad experience with one or been let down by one, literally or otherwise. But when I looked at it, I saw a thin sheet of fabric stretched high enough between two trees not to kill me but high enough to hurt me if I fell, which I was convinced would be my story.

Heather encouraged me and demonstrated getting in and out, testing the strength of the straps each time. We were similar in size, so I knew logically it should be the same for me, but logic and trust don’t always go hand-in-hand.

You should have seen my first attempts to hammock. I looked like I was doing a dead man’s squat – trying to back into it while keeping my feet and weight leaning forward, hedging my bets. Finally, unable to squat any longer, I surrendered to the hammock. Not ready to lay back fully in faith, I looked anything but peaceful, comfortable, and restful in those first moments. The woodland creatures all scattered. But with each minute that passed, the hammock and my faith in it held.

It took a friend’s example and encouragement, seeing her enjoy and trust the hammock, for me to learn to trust one. More importantly, I had to experience it for myself, to put my full weight

and trust into it. I eventually bought my own hammock, which is always in my car, ready for an opportunity to mock.

About a year after that camping trip to Arkansas, I was in Kenya with a team from our church. During a late afternoon break at our lodge, I spotted an old canvas hammock tied up between two trees. With my newfound love and confidence in mocking, I got in the hammock, laid back, and scanned the tree lines for monkeys. A few moments later, one of the ropes broke, and the hammock and I fell to the ground with a thud.

II.

It had been quite a week for the disciples of Jesus. After three years of following Jesus, seeing his miracles, listening to his teachings, watching his interactions with people from all walks of life, and experiencing all these things themselves, they had come to believe Jesus was the one they had been waiting for. It had been hard at first to put the full weight of their hopes and dreams into this new teacher and his radical, upside-down kingdom ways. He challenged all they knew. He welcomed those who were excluded. He spoke up against those who oppressed and abused others. He touched those who the world called untouchable. He made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the dead to rise. The more they experienced Jesus, the more they surrendered to the ways of Jesus, the more confident they became in their beliefs about where this was all headed with Jesus.

The week began with a parade as Jesus and his followers entered Jerusalem to an amped and hopeful crowd waving palm branches, crying out to be saved. The city was buzzing with talk about this teacher who had raised a man from the dead. On Monday, the stories changed to this same teacher flipping tables in the Temple, chasing off animals, and clearing the temple with a homemade whip. By Wednesday, the disciple Judas had made a deal: thirty pieces of silver for a kiss of betrayal. By Thursday night, the disciples were sharing a meal with Jesus, full of expectations and questions.

But by Friday, Good Friday, Jesus was mocked, hung between two trees, and all their hopes and faith fell to the ground with a thud.

III.

Many of us know what it is like to be swaying in life, enjoying the breeze, full of trust and faith in life and ourselves, only to have something or someone send us to the ground with a thud: an unwanted diagnosis, a broken vow, an unexpected betrayal, a hurting child, or a life-changing phone call.

How do we rise again? How do we believe and hope again?

When everything fell apart for the disciples on that first Easter Sunday, they wept, grieved, and hid in fear, locking themselves in a room. But no matter where they were, the Risen Savior met them there.

In chapter 20 of the Gospel of John, the Risen Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene as she weeps and grieves outside his empty tomb on the third day after his death. Christ appears in her grief and calls her by name. He transforms her grief and gives her a mission to go and tell the others.

On the same day, in the evening, Jesus, who had left a sealed tomb, entered a sealed room where his disciples, minus Thomas, were gathered. Some, maybe even all, of Jesus' disciples initially refused to believe. They were afraid. Jesus appeared, offered them peace, showed them his scars, and transformed their fear into joy and purpose.

Eight days later, once again gathered in that same locked room, Thomas is now present and unconvinced of their stories of seeing Jesus alive. He can't accept it from hearing, even from trusted friends. He asked to experience it, just as the other disciples did. He was asking for nothing more, nothing less. Jesus refuses to let deadbolts keep him from the one who lacks faith, so he appears again through locked doors, offering peace. Jesus knows what is on Thomas' mind before Thomas can tell him and is gracious with Thomas' doubts, inviting him to touch the scars of his crucifixion. There is no account that Thomas did so. Rather, he made the greatest confession of faith, declaring, "My Lord and My God." Jesus appeared, and Thomas' skepticism was transformed into faith. Ancient tradition teaches that Thomas would carry the Gospel to the western edges of India, where he spent thirty years sharing the love of Christ before dying a martyr.

If our first reaction to a report of resurrection is skepticism, we're in good company. This entire chapter in the Gospel of John records how different disciples rose from skepticism to belief through personal experiences with Jesus. Jesus offers himself repeatedly to people who long to see him, giving them the repeated gift of his presence and his peace. Jesus did not rebuke or shame them for not believing, for even though he had been telling them for nearly two years that he would die and be raised up, it was a big ask to fully surrender into this miracle and trust it would hold.

Over the weekend, in those dark, confusing, and fearful hours, their faith and hope had landed with a thud. In love, Jesus met them where they were and gave them peace, purpose, and power through the Holy Spirit. And Jesus meets us where we are, too.

IV.

We confess we want to see Jesus, but Jesus and John say it is not necessary to "see or touch" Jesus to believe. John didn't tell the story of Thomas and the other disciples, so we might envy them as though the power of Christ's resurrection could never be experienced in our lives today. John wrote this book: "so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name." (vv. 30-31) He wrote so that people of every age could know that Jesus is God and that faith in him brings life.

Yes, it was a blessing for the early Christians to see our Lord and know he was alive, but that was not what gave them life. They were saved, not by seeing, but by believing. The emphasis

throughout the Gospel of John is on believing. You and I today cannot see or touch Christ, nor can we see him perform the signs and miracles John wrote about in this book. But in Scripture, we come face to face with Jesus Christ, how he lived, what he said, what he did, and how he loved. We come face to face with Jesus Christ in this gathering of believers as we bear witness to one another about the presence and peace of Jesus in our lives.

John says all the evidence points to the conclusion that Jesus is indeed God come in the flesh, the Savior of the world. And in believing, you will be blessed. In believing, you will find abundant and everlasting life. 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.” (v.29)

Like the disciples, Jesus loves us enough to meet us right where we are – whether weeping or grieving, fearing or doubting, or lying flat on the ground in the dirt when life lets us down.

V.

After my hammock let down in Kenya, I could have just stayed on the ground, rope and trust broken. But I got back up. Had I refused to rise and hang my hammock again, I would have missed out on many amazing mocking adventures over the past five years. My own experience and the witness of people like Heather reminded me to rise strong after finding myself in the dirt.

In the scriptures, the word for resurrection is often a Greek one, *anastasis*. (uhna-STAUH-sis) It means a rising up, a raising up, a standing up. After a time in the dirt, after we fall, after landing with a thud, after the death of all kinds — *anastasis* (uhna-STAUH-sis) is our rising strong. We become people who, as poet Wendell Berry said, practice resurrection. We demonstrate the power of God’s redemptive work in us and our world in how we live and love and how we rise strong from the things the world and we think will bury us.

What do you need from God? Ask. Jesus will not rebuke or shame you for your questions or doubts, nor will we. Where do you find yourself this morning? Jesus will meet you where you are with love, kindness, and peace. Nothing can keep Jesus from meeting you and bringing you peace.

For those who feel isolated and lonely – peace be with you.

For those who worry your sin is too great for God to forgive — peace be with you.

For those who despair amid pain, suffering, or sadness — peace be with you.

For those overwhelmed by a world filled with hate, violence, and blame — peace be with you.

For those fearful that death-dealing powers have the upper hand — peace be with you.¹

The empty grave means everything’s game for resurrection. Every dead heart, dream, hope, even your skepticism. Shovel dirt on anything hopeless. Jesus is alive. The political and religious leaders thought they were burying Jesus in a grave, but they were planting him like a seed. They thought they were killing him and a movement, but they were making possible a new harvest of

"much fruit," a "lifting up" through which Jesus will "draw all people to himself" (12:32). People like you and me.

Jesus was mocked and hung between two trees, and that powerful display of divine love is something we can fully surrender to and trust. Christ's love will hold us. And when we trust in him, believe in him, we are raised up to new life in Christ – not just one day, but in the here and now. I've seen a multitude of resurrections or "rising ups" hiding in plain sight. New life breaking through. We see courage rising from fear, hope rising from grief, wholeness rising from brokenness. Jesus rose to remind us that there is always hope, God is always with us, and God's love and justice are more powerful than fear, hate, and death.

This morning, Jesus will meet you wherever you are, not with judgment or shame but full of love and peace so that you might believe, be blessed, and have life in his name now and forever. For the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

Melissa Hatfield © 2024

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2021/3/27/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>