



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

Do You Trust in Jesus Christ?

SCRIPTURE:
John 20: 19-31

September 10, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There is a tradition in the Presbyterian Church to ask leaders questions when they are ordained or installed. Next Sunday we will elect a slate of officers who will serve us in the years to come and in January they will respond to these questions in their service of ordination. They are big questions and when they say, “Yes,” it’s a holy time. Rodger and I have decided we would like to talk through some of these questions. These questions speak to some important theological convictions of our faith.

The questions include: Will you serve with energy, intelligence, imagination and love? Will you preserve the peace, unity and purity of the church? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry? Will you work for the reconciliation of the world? Do you believe the scriptures to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God’s word to you?

These are not small questions. They ask a lot. I last said “yes” to these questions in March of 2004 standing in front of you. I said “yes,” but I knew my “yes” said less about my faithfulness and more about God’s faithfulness. Behind these questions are theological affirmations of who we understand God to be.

The first question is this: Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior and acknowledge him Lord of all and head of the church? I wish the question were phrased differently. I wish the church asked, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” Instead the church asks, “Do you trust in Jesus Christ?” That’s different. Belief can be limited to what we think. The question is not asking simply what we think about Jesus. The question is asking will we follow Jesus? To trust Jesus means that his life influences our choices. When we trust Jesus, we live like Jesus. We participate in his life.

When we lived in Florida we had a friend at church named Shirley. Shirley cleaned houses and

she came to Carol and me one day and said, “I would like to clean your house every couple of weeks.” Carol and I were both working full time and the kids were little and into everything and we just had one nostril out of the water. I said, “Shirley, you are a godsend. That would be wonderful.”

So, every other Thursday, Shirley would come by to clean the house. This meant that every other Wednesday, Carol would say to me, “Could you clean up the kitchen? Shirley is coming tomorrow.” I would say, “But isn’t Shirley coming to clean?” “Yes.” “Well, why do I have to clean the kitchen if Shirley is coming to clean?” “Now, Tom, how do you expect Shirley to be able to clean up anything if the house is a mess? Get busy.” I have to confess that I never understood why this worked the way it worked, but my testimony is by the time Wednesday was over, Carol and I were exhausted trying to get ready for Shirley. I *believed* the house would be cleaner when Shirley came, but Carol she *trusted* it would be cleaner, so we spent Wednesday participating. That’s what it means to trust.

It’s one thing to believe that turning the other cheek is a good idea, it’s another thing not to strike back when we have been hit. It’s one thing to believe forgiveness is faithful, but when we trust, we might actually forgive someone.

The disciples were hiding behind a locked door because they were afraid. It is there that Jesus appeared to them. But Thomas was not there. He was picking up pizza for the group or something. It doesn’t say where he was, it just says he was not there. When he returns, the disciples greet him. “Pepperoni, yum! Oh, by the way, the risen Christ was just here—said to say hello.” Thomas said, “I don’t believe that. I won’t believe it unless I touch his wounds.”

Then Jesus comes back again. Jesus speaks to

Thomas, and I don't know if Thomas touched him—it doesn't say—but Thomas, the doubter, makes the most significant confession of faith in all of John's Gospel. "My Lord and my God."

And we might think that this is the reason Jesus keeps returning: So that someone will confess their faith. "Jesus, you are my Lord, my God." But earlier in the story, Jesus tells his disciples why he appeared to them. He says, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." That's why Jesus keeps coming back. It's not enough to confess that he is God. Jesus wants his followers to unlock the doors. Jesus says, "Unlock the door and go live my life."

I've told you before of the conversation Rev. Mark Labberton had with a young man visiting his church. The young man was new to the church and Mark asked, "So, what brings you here? What are you looking for?" He said, "I am not completely sure. But I suppose I want to know if I hang around your church, will I meet people who are like Jesus?" If he asked you, what would you say? I've known some people who look a lot like Jesus from time to time.

Ruby Bridges is one. It was 1960 and Ruby went to William Frantz Elementary in New Orleans. The first day she went, she was the only student in her class. All the rest of the children stayed home. Ruby was the first Black child to attend this school. She was in first grade. That whole year, she was the only student in her first-grade class. She had to be escorted by Federal Marshals because parents of the white children lined the sidewalk and screamed at her and called her names. One man brought a child-sized coffin with a black doll in it. As they verbally assaulted her, Ruby calmly walked the sidewalk and she talked to herself. At least, that's what it looked like. When someone asked what she was doing, she said, "I'm praying for them. For my granny tells me the Bible says pray for your enemies. So, I'm praying for them."¹ Six years old and she was the grown-up. And she looked a lot like Jesus.

Do you trust in Jesus? I don't know that I have the unwavering trust of Ruby Bridges, but I know that I want to.

I think of Bishara Awad. I met him in Bethlehem. His father was killed in the Israeli war of 1948. He

stepped out of his house to go to work and was shot in the street. Just being Palestinian meant he was viewed as a security threat. Bishara's family is Christian. He eventually founded the Bethlehem Bible College. I had the privilege to visit him in Bethlehem. From his office, we could see the security wall that rises up high in the air making it impossible to move without harassment. Looking at that wall, with the gun turrets on top, I asked Bishara, "Do you ever lose hope? Most of the world has given up on this land. Do you ever lose hope?" He looked at me and said, "Tom, the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place less than an hour walk from this spot. It is impossible to lose hope."

Do you trust in Jesus Christ? Honestly, I don't have the courage that Bishara Awad has lived, but I know I want to.

I think of my friend Lewis Galloway. Lewis is a pastor, now retired. Thirty years ago, we served sister Presbyterian churches in the same city. He called me and said, "I have some bad news, our mutual friend Robert has died." Lewis said, "Tom, we are going to have his memorial service at my church and I need you to be a part of the service." I was one of six Presbyterian pastors Lewis called to be part of this service. I said, "Six preachers? That sounds like a long service." He said, "I want you to read scripture, but mostly I just need as many of us as possible to stand together in this service." "I understand," I said.

Robert was a friend. He was also a Presbyterian pastor, although he served no church. Robert was gay and in those days, the church had not made up its mind about people like Robert whom God called to ministry, but the church still rejected. He would have been a fine pastor, but there was no room for him. It was 1992 and for the previous 12 months Robert had battled AIDS. I had visited him numerous times in the hospital.

Lewis said, "It's time we demonstrated to this community that Robert belonged among us. We all need to stand together. Telling the world that we welcome all of God's children is always the right choice." I have to tell you that seems like no big deal today. And I am a little ashamed to admit it, but in 1992, there were more than a few people who felt

¹ Robert Coles, *Harvard Diary: Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular*, 1988 p. 114.

that extending such dignity to a gay man who had died of AIDS was a bit unseemly. But Lewis paid attention to Jesus and Lewis knew that Jesus would stand with Robert, so he asked us to do the same.

Do you trust in Jesus Christ? I don't have the unwavering faith of Ruby, or the courage of Bishara, or the gracious hospitality of Lewis, but I want to. So, when asked, "Do you trust?" I say, "Yes." Maybe that is enough to unlock the door.

Jesus keeps coming back to his disciples to get us to unlock that door and move out into the world and live his life. But you already know that.

Today there is a ministry fair. Walk around and look at all the ways we are being the church together. It's there because we don't simply believe in Jesus, we trust him.

And at Antioch there will be a Fall Festival. We will welcome the larger community, build relationships and celebrate our connection with one another. It's what trust in Jesus looks like. Tonight there will be a food truck festival here at the Mission campus to do the same.

It's peanut-butter month at the Food Pantry—just

one more way for us to battle the dehumanizing reality of hunger. We have that pantry because we don't just believe in Jesus, we trust him. It shapes how we live.

There will be two concerts this week—one on Thursday and another next Sunday—all because we recognize the connection between beauty and holiness. And Saturday the Presbyterian women will meet to talk about faith in the face of difficult times. It's what trust in Jesus looks like.

And Saturday we will also gather in this room for a memorial service, and one more time, we will express our trust that the love of God calls us by name and that holy love will never let us go. That is what trust in Jesus looks like. I could go on, but you get the point.

Do you trust in Jesus Christ? I'm not always a grown-up, like Ruby, and I'm seldom courageous like Bishara, or as gracious as Lewis, but I want to be. I know you do, too. So say, "yes." Maybe that is enough to unlock the door and move into the world to do the good that is ours to do—to live like Jesus. But you already know that.