

AColyte

Opening of School 2024
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



Here We Go

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WHAT IS THE *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2024-25 school year.

This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian.

That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "*AColyte*" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

Feel free to reply if you have questions or comments or corrections.

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Austin College Opening Convocation

August 26, 2024

(which also happened to be Linnea's and my 35th Wedding Anniversary)

Here we go.

--Dallas Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott before every Offensive play.

We can't put it off to another day.

The time has come today.

--The Chambers Brothers

(a hippie band from the 1960s)

So last Monday night was the 32nd time I've gotten to help lead Austin College's Opening Convocation.

But it was the first time I've ever made an explicit football reference in that service.

As I stood up to deliver the Benediction, I suddenly thought of Dallas Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott. As many of you know – but clearly many of you didn't – as every Dallas Cowboys offensive play begins, Dak walks up and stands behind the offensive line and looks around.

He looks to see which defensive players are on the field and how they are positioned. Then he calls out some numbers that indicate to his players what their blocking and running and shifting assignments will be as the play commences.

That can be a pretty complicated and sophisticated process.

That's what's going on here:



When he's finished giving these impromptu instructions to his teammates – as a way of letting them know that all his instructions are complete--Dak says "Here we go."

That's what I felt like at the end of Opening Convocation. As that energetic service ended – at the end of all our Opening of School and Orientation activities – I felt like Dak after he's finished calling out his assignments.

We were finished getting ready.

It was time to run the play.

It was time to get the year going.

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Occasionally during the school year, I send around an *AColyte*. It's basically an email message/reflection/rant from the Chaplain's desk about something that's on my mind.

They eventually get uploaded onto a blog:

<https://theacolyte.acsites.org/>

These *AColytes* usually involve the Bible (and often song lyrics).

I'm always grateful for the opportunity to think with you about who we are and what we do at this little, richly diverse, Church-related college on the Texas prairie.

I know we don't all read and hear the Bible the same way – and that's fine.

Your full participation on this campus does not depend at all on what you think about the Bible.

But I like thinking about the Bible and sometimes I'll invite y'all to spend a few minutes thinking with me about which things matter more than other things.

There's a Bible story that's been on my mind a lot this summer: the so-called Doubting Thomas story from John 20:19-29.

It's a great story.

As we enter the 176th year of Austin College –

- a year that includes an outstanding entering class,
- and will include a contentious Presidential election
- and concerns on many campuses about encampments, demonstrations, and civil disobedience

I think there are 3 features of “Doubting Thomas” story – 3 themes – that can be helpful for us as we enter this particular year together: Peace, Community, and Belief.

Here's what the text says:

***19 When it was evening on that day,
the first day of the week,
and the doors were locked
where the disciples were,
for fear of the Jews,
Jesus came and stood among them
and said, “Peace be with you.”***

A couple things about that:

The day in question was Easter.

Earlier in Chapter 20, Jesus has risen from the dead.

He died back in chapter 19.

Ten of his disciples are gathered together in a locked room. They are afraid that the people who had arrested, convicted, and executed Jesus were going to come after them next.

When the text says that the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews” it’s not referring to all Jews. John is just referring to the individuals who had killed Jesus.

Through the centuries, bigoted Christians have used this text to justify anti-Semitism, but that’s a cheap and illegitimate misuse of the Bible.

So ten fearful disciples are gathered in this locked room.

And then Jesus just *shows up!*

In the context of this story, this guy who they had watched die on Friday is now hanging out with them on Sunday.

I think we could legitimately call this a Zombie story.

It’s a dead man walking.

And then Jesus says “Peace be with you.”

I’m guessing that “peace” was not the primary characteristic of that room at that time.

²⁰ After he said this,

**he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
²¹ Jesus said to them again,
“Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”**

Here's Jesus mentioning "peace" again.

Despite what some of us learned in Sunday School, I don't think this is a story about doubt.

I think it's a story about peace.

**²² When he had said this,
he breathed on them
and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.
²³ If you forgive the sins of any,
they are forgiven them;
if you retain the sins of any,
they are retained.”**

This is possibly the grossest verse in the whole Bible.

If you think "morning breath" is bad, imagine "Tomb Breath."

Jesus essentially told them, "Here, touch my gross wounds and then smell my breath while you're at it."

Yikes.

Now watch what happens next in the story.

**²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin),
one of the twelve,**

was not with them when Jesus came.

We don't know why Thomas hadn't been with the others, but this wouldn't be much of a story if he had.

***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.”***

So here at the end of verse 25, there is not unanimity among the disciples about whether or not Jesus has risen from the dead.

When I was in seminary back in the mid-80s, we were taught that that's a fairly significant theological point for us Christians.

But it's important for us to notice that there's not unanimity among the disciples at the end of verse 25.

Ten of them are convinced that Jesus – who had been really, completely, decomposing, *rigor mortis* dead – wasn't so much dead any more.

And Thomas, for perfectly understandable reasons, just can't buy that.

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The most profound moment in this story – and the most relevant point for all of us as we begin this academic year together – takes place in the space between verses 25 and 26.

Verse 25 ended without agreement about Jesus' status.

Verse 26 begins by saying

**²⁶ A week later
his disciples were again in the house,
and Thomas was with them.**

Don't overlook that.

It's huge.

Two times already in this story, Jesus has told the disciples, "Peace be with you."

And he's gonna say it again before verse 26 is over.

In the space between verses 25 and 26—in the week that passes between those verses—

- the ten disciples had not kicked Thomas out of their community;
- and he hadn't left on his own.

I think we can see in the space between verses 25 and 26 what peace looks like.

We see that peace in the disciples' recognition that it was more important for them to stay together and care for each other—to pay attention to each other—than it was for them to agree with each other *even though they did not agree about whether or not Jesus was alive.*

And verse 26 continues:

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

That's the third time Jesus talks about peace in this story.

Hippie.

***27 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.”***

Let's think for a minute about what it means to believe."

It's a word we use a lot, but it's difficult to define.

Here's the best way I know to talk about what it means to "believe" in something:

We're all familiar with the Declaration of Independence to some degree.

And we know the most famous five words there:

"All men are created equal."

Americans don't all agree about exactly what that means.

We never have.

And we certainly haven't always treated our fellow citizens equally.

But we don't argue about whether or not those words are relevant.

Nobody ever says out loud, "Naw, I don't really believe all people are created equal."

We are all part of a country that has simply decided to live in a world where all people are equal.

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

When I’m talking about this story in church, I suggest that, in verse 27, Jesus is inviting Thomas to live in a world where Easter is true.

But believing means something different in our life together at Austin College.

***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.”***

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This is the part of the *AColyte* where the Chaplain geeks out a little bit.

There are seven values listed in the Austin College Mission Statement, and I may well be the only person on this campus who can recite them from memory.

According to our Mission Statement, Austin College values:

- Personal Growth
- Justice
- Community
- Service
- Intellectual & Personal Integrity
- Academic Excellence and
- Participation in Community Life

You can look it up.

<https://www.austincollege.edu/explore/in-words#:~:text=I%20can't%20imagine%20a,pre%2Dprofessional%20and%20professional%20programs.>

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Let's begin this year, and begin every day, by deciding to be a campus where those things are true – where those pretty words from our website actually describe our life together.

Let's believe in Austin College.

All of us.

Let's attend to, accompany, and nurture each other in this important season of our lives.

Let's pay particular attention to those who are having a hard time – on this campus and beyond.

Let's remember that

- we're stronger together than we are separately and
- that everybody on this campus deserves to be here and
- deserves to be heard.

Let's act like gifted people act, sharing what we can whenever we can with whomever we can.

[Good job at **First We Serve, Class of 2028.**

You prepared **43,314** meals
that will be sent to
the House of Hope Children's Home
in Puerto Lempira, Honduras.]

Let's help each other work hard and do well.

Let's mean what we say about Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice.

And let's commit to each other to stand shoulder to shoulder and show the world how to live together in peace.

Let's remind each other and show the world that it's more important to stick together and care for each other than to agree with each other about everything.

Let's believe in Austin College.

Here we go.

Until Next Time, I Remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Ready to Run the Play,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain