

The Gift of Doubt

April 27, 2014: Second Sunday of Easter

Scriptures: John 20:19–31

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I. Introduction

My grandfather Parker was very fond of the passage in Mark's gospel when the father is seeking to have his son healed and Jesus asks him if he believes and the father responds, "I believe, Lord help thou my unbelief," which captures in a very wonderful way some of the dichotomy that we talked a little bit about last Sunday, on Easter.

You will remember in Matthew's gospel there's that very interesting line when the disciples are standing before the risen Christ up in Galilee, Matthew says, "They worshipped and they doubted." And we talked a little bit about the tension there between belief and doubt. It is not accidental that every single year, the Sunday after Easter our lectionary, tells the story of Thomas that we all know as Doubting Thomas. This is actually, I think, a little bit unfair to Thomas because he's got a lot of wonderful characteristics to him.

We hear about Thomas first when Jesus is getting ready to go down to raise Lazarus from the dead. There's some risk there because the authorities were seeking to kill him and Thomas is the one who says to his fellow disciples, "Let's go with the Lord and die with him." We're ready, in other words. We know what's in front of us.

Thomas also has a tendency to be pretty direct and pretty honest and so that when Jesus is gathered with the disciples in the upper room the night before he dies, and he tells his teachings to his disciples and he says to the disciples, "You know the

way that I'm going." Thomas is the one who has the courage to say, "You know, Lord, we don't actually know where you're going and we don't know the way. So, you need to spell it out for us a little bit." And Thomas, even in this story, is not asking for anything that the other disciples haven't experienced.

Mary, of course, is the one who finds the empty tomb on Easter Sunday and she doesn't know what it means. So, she runs back to get Peter and James and John who come to also see the open tomb, and nobody knows what it means at that point. And then it's Mary who -- as she is weeping in the garden meets the risen Christ who calls to her by name and she realizes that he has been raised. She goes back to tell the disciples, the disciples don't believe her on the basis of her witness, and that's why they're all clustered together in this locked room on the evening of Easter when Jesus appears in their midst and gives them his peace. So, it's not unreasonable for Thomas to have wanted the same kind of experience that everybody else had had. He says to them, "You all got to see the wounded hands and the wounded side; I need to see it, too."

But we have attached this Doubting moniker to him and it's often used in a sense of being critical and we often, in the church, use the idea of doubt as a criticism. When people are grieving loss we often try to brush that off by encouraging them to have faith. When people are wrestling with tough issues we often either explicitly or implicitly convey the idea that if they just trusted a little bit harder, if they worked just a little bit more, God will take care of that. And Thomas is a wonderful counterbalance to that tendency that we have in the church because Jesus doesn't criticize Thomas for

doubts. In fact, Jesus appears to Thomas and gives to Thomas exactly what Thomas wanted and needed.

II. Engagement

I think that's a helpful model for us because all of us, I think, are genetically hardwired to seek answers to things that we don't understand. We want to understand how the world works. We want to understand how God works. We want to integrate all of the things that we experienced and know about the world in a way that is coherent and makes sense to us. This is the impetus that gives us the wonderful blessing of science because we want to understand how the world works. That's why we all love mystery stories because we want to figure out how it all fits together.

III. Mystery

Sometimes in the church we are not always good about welcoming those kinds of questions, amen? Sometimes I think it's because we don't know the answers and so, somebody else is asking the question and I don't know the answer, and my response is to be defensive. But a lot of churches, I think, shoot themselves in the foot by inviting people to trust in a way that doesn't encourage their questioning. We can't have a faith that invites us to leave our brains at the door. We have a faith that engages and it invites us to be completely engaged in the search for how God is at work among us all the time. Doubt is the process of being called into an exploration of how God is working.

You know death is the one thing that we all know we cannot avoid and it's the one thing that we know we can't ever understand in its entirety. And so, when the disciples see death turned on its head through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, they've got to figure out how to incorporate that into their lives in the same way that we who hear that story every year are invited to incorporate it in our lives, and we need to puzzle through what that means.

Doubt is a gift that God gives us to draw us deeper and deeper into that holy mystery and if we try to avoid it, it finds other ways of sneaking in. There's a wonderful theologian in the last century named Benjamin Jowett who said that, "Doubt comes in at the window when inquiry is denied at the door." Now, I like that idea that if we can't invite inquiry at the door, doubt is going to find a way of getting in one way or the other because if we're intellectually honest, if we're seeking for who God is, it's got to be part of that journey. So, let's embrace it as Thomas did and invite it in to guide us. See, the reality is our faith is always a mystery. We can never know the entirety of who God is, and as we explore and deepen our walk in discipleship, God continues to grow with us. Because God is always greater than our understanding and so, as our understanding grows and deepens, who God is continues to grow and deepen.

There's a wonderful scene in C.S. Lewis' book and in the movie *Prince Caspian* in which Lucy Pevensie, who's the little girl who's the hero in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* encounters Aslan who is the Great Lion, who's the Christ figure in those stories. And she sees him in *Prince Caspian* for the first time in that book and she says, "Aslan, you've grown." Because he's much bigger than he was in the first book.

And he says, “Every time you grow, I grow,” because God is always moving ahead of us as we deepen our walk in faith.

The first pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick, wrote a wonderful little book called *Your God is Too Small* and he said in that book, “I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than to be in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it.” Part of our journey of faith is starting to get comfortable with the idea that we will never have all the answers and at the same time we can never stop searching for all the answers, that wonderful ambiguity, that wonderful tension of constantly being drawn forward in our search for what God is and who God is for us.

Pastor and author Frederick Buechner wrote that, “Religion points to that area of human experience where one way or another, human beings come upon mystery as a summons to pilgrimage.” I like that line, that “mystery is a summons,” it’s a call that beckons us to be on a pilgrimage with and to God.

IV. Encounter

So, Thomas beckons us forward as well with his honesty, his searching and his passionate desire to encounter the risen Christ for himself. Not to hear about it from his friends. Not to trust in it blindly, but to know the risen Christ’s presence. And Thomas invites us to be on that journey as well.

V. Conclusion

Francis Bacon wrote, “If we begin with certainties, we shall end in doubts; but if we begin with doubts and are patient in them, we shall end in certainties.” Well, I’m

not sure that we'll end in certainties and I'm not sure that's the goal. But I do know that if we search, if we are honest with the doubts that we have, if we engage them, if we embrace them and follow where they lead, then Christ will meet us along the way and offer us exactly what we're looking for.

Amen.