**Second Sunday of Easter**

**Sunday April 19, 2020**

**“Is Doubt a Part of Faith?” (John 20:19-31)**

Poor Thomas, he gets a bad rap. He will always be remembered as “*Doubting Thomas*.” We continue to chastise him for his skepticism and we suspect that if we’d been there, we would have believed outright without asking for further evidence. We’re astounded that he had the audacity to demand to touch the wounds of Jesus prior to belief in the resurrection. Our reading of this story from John’s Gospel leads us to the conclusion that doubt is the opposite of faith. But we need to realize that this outlook will have a profound impact on our spiritual lives and our attitudes toward others, especially those who have deep questions about faith. Berating ourselves for having doubts or judging others for their struggles with faith goes against the message of this story. When Jesus encountered Thomas, he did not condemn him. Instead, he invited him to explore the evidence for the resurrection. Jesus’ encounter with Thomas is characteristic of all of his interactions with the people in this chapter. *Jesus meets people where they are at and facilitates their steps of faith.*

In John chapter twenty, we observe a “series of distinctive vignettes in which Jesus encounters individuals, *meeting them at their level of insight and need, so that each may respond in faith*” (Kevin Quast, *Reading the Gospel of John,* p. 129). The Beloved Disciple met the risen Jesus when he saw the empty tomb and the folded up grave clothes. In that moment he *saw* and *believed* that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20:8). Mary Magdalene, blinded by her grief, met Jesus when he related to her on a personal level and called her by name (John 20:16). Consequently, she was able to express her faith to the other disciples. “*I have seen the Lord,*” she said to them (John 20:18).

But Mary’s Easter declaration didn’t seem to have a significant impact upon the disciples. Later that same day, they still remained in hiding, fearful that the authorities might take hostile action against them because of their association with Jesus (John 20:19). So, how did this group of frightened disciples, hiding from the world behind locked doors, obtain the courage to turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6)? The risen Jesus met these frightened disciples in their fears and granted them his peace, joy and presence.

The physical constraints of locked doors could not keep Jesus from reuniting with his disciples. Taking the initiative, he came to them and stood in their midst and spoke the words that they needed to hear in that situation – “*Peace be with you”* (John 20:19). He also confirmed his identity by showing them the wounds on his hands and side. Once the disciples saw the wounds, they realized that Jesus was alive and “*they were filled with joy when they saw the Lord*” (John 20:20). Jesus’ earlier promise to them came true: “*So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you*” (John 16:22). Jesus stood among them as the crucified and risen One, meeting them in their fear and giving them peace and joy*.* In the same way, the risen Jesus is present with us. He meets us in whatever circumstances we are facing and he gives us his *peace* and *joy*.

But the peace of God should not keep us cloistered behind closed doors (even though this is the reality amidst COVID-19). The gift of peace enables us to go out into the world in mission. The disciples were huddled behind closed doors due to their fears. In response Jesus gave them the peace of God and sent them out into the world. “*Peace be with you,”* he said, *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you*” (John 20:21). But we can’t carry out the mission of God in our own strength. Right after Jesus commissioned his disciples, he *breathed* on them and said, “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” (John 20:22). The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is essential for mission. As ones who are sent forth by Christ into the world, we need the new life of the Spirit within us.

Jesus emphasized that rebirth by the Spirit is essential for God’s new life to be in us (John 3:3, 5-8). He also stressed the importance of the Holy Spirit as our advocate (John 14:16-17), our teacher (John 14:26) and the one who guides us in truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). As Christians we are guided, taught, empowered and sanctified by the Holy Spirit and we are sent out into the world as bearers of God’s new life. With Christ present within us through the Spirit, we are empowered to represent God in the world.

Yet this message of new life in Christ is one that will provoke various responses. Jesus likened his presence in the world to a light shining in the darkness (John 3:19-21). When faced with the light of Christ some will flee, but others will draw near. This will be our experience as we shine Christ’s light into our world. As a result, we have lots of fears about going out into the world. It’s safe in here within the fellowship of our Christian family. But when we go out into the world, we might face indifference, scepticism, hostility, and ridicule toward our faith. In a world where faith is a private matter, we may be hesitant to engage in discussions about spiritual matters. Yet God’s peace calms our fears and his presence through the Spirit enables us to go forth in mission.

Fortunately, this chapter offers us a good example of a positive interaction with someone who was a bit sceptical about the Christian message. When the other disciples declared, “We have seen the Lord,” Thomas doesn’t buy it and he demanded more proof (John 20:25). He required physical evidence for the resurrection - “*I won’t believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side*” (John 20:25). For this reason he has acquired the nickname *Doubting Thomas* and so we look upon him and anyone else who have doubts with a certain degree of scorn. Yet when Jesus met Thomas a week later, he didn’t chastise him because he had doubts. Jesus graciously welcomed Thomas’ doubts and reached out to him to help him overcome them.

Perhaps a good visual will help us to grasp the significance of this scene. Throughout history many artists have depicted Thomas’ encounter with the risen Christ, but one of the most notable works is Caravaggio’s, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (I’ve attached a picture of this to your email). While there are many interesting details in this painting, the image that is most striking is Thomas’ finger in Jesus’ wound. But even more extraordinary is Jesus’ hand, grasping onto Thomas’ wrist and guiding his finger into the spear wound. While this is an imaginative reconstruction of the biblical scene, it nevertheless captures the spirit of the passage. Jesus was not offended by Thomas’ doubts. He embraced him, took him by the hand, and provided him with all the evidence he needed to come to faith. When confronted by the irrefutable evidence for the resurrection, Thomas recognized the error of his way and made the paramount Christological confession of the Gospel: *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28).

This scene should lead us to have a robust discussion about our understanding of *faith.* On the one hand, faith does involve the *intellectual acceptance* of a set of theological beliefs, as illustrated by Thomas’ grand declaration here. But faith is also a *relationship* based on trust, fostered over a long period of time and grounded in a personal encounter with God. Both elements of faith are crucial, but the question is, which aspect of faith do we tend to put our stress upon? Is faith merely a matter of agreeing to a series of propositional statements about God? Or is it something more? Is it the process of getting to know God more and more?

As your pastor, I love and care for all of you, the whole flock of God. But because I’m a father of young adults, I’m especially concerned about young people and young adults. It’s no secret that, statistically speaking, almost an entire generation of young adults, defined as *millenials* (people born in the years 1981-1996), have left the church. While there are several reasons for their disenchantment with Christianity, an increased scepticism about its religious claims is an important one. So, how do we communicate our faith to a generation of people who are openly sceptical about our religious claims? Certainly, there is a need for apologetics and intellectual inquiry. But in our quest for theological truth, we must never forget that Christianity, first and foremost is about a person named Jesus who desires to have a relationship with us. In some circles the study of the Bible focuses on distilling theological truth from it or defending its reliability. While these are good approaches to Scripture, they reduce the Bible to a book for information only. But what if we were to see Scripture as a letter from someone who loves us? Would we read the Bible differently?

Faith is not a list of theological beliefs that we have to sign off on before God accepts us. Doubt is not a sin. Struggling with something that’s written in the Bible does not cut you off from God. Like all personal relationships, faith is something that is nurtured over time. So, bring your doubts, questions, and struggles to God. He will embrace you, take you by the hand and provide you with what you need to come to a deeper faith in him.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), a Christian theologian and philosopher, had a motto, “*faith seeking understanding.*” He wrote, “*I do not seek to understand that I may believe but believe that I might understand.*” How often we get this turned around and stress that you have to understand everything about God before coming to faith. This leaves little room for questions, intellectual struggles, doubt or even honest theological inquiry. This morning I want to stress that faith is a relationship. It is a love for God that grows into a deeper knowledge of God.

*Prayer*

Loving Lord,

This morning we pray for people here who are filled with doubts,  
who wonder whether you exist and whether you are listening to our prayers,  
We pray for people who doubt the purpose of life,  
who face feelings of meaningless and despair.  
Even when we have that sinking feeling,  
give us the wisdom to turn to you.  
Lord we want to believe, help our unbelief!  
Give us faith, small as a mustard seed,  
so that we can be your faithful people,  
believing in your power to save,  
believing in your power to reign supreme,  
believing that we can share this good news  
with everyone we meet.  
We ask all this in Jesus’ name, Amen.