

To doubt, indeed...

John 20:19-31

April 11, 2010

A little boy went to Sunday School one day when his class was studying Moses. After church, as they were riding home in their car, his father quizzed his son about what he had learned that morning in class.

“We learned about Moses,” said the little boy,” “about the Exodus and how Moses freed his people from the Egyptians.”

“Good,” said the father. “Can you tell me more?”

“It was great, Dad,” said the little boy. “Moses crept behind enemy lines at night and sneaked his people under the barbed wire **past the searchlights and out into the desert**. They got to the Red Sea and they seemed to be stuck. The water was in front of them. The Egyptians were coming up fast behind them in tanks. So, Moses ordered the Engineering Corps to build a **huge pontoon bridge over the Red Sea**. The people all crossed safely. But, when the Egyptians started to cross the bridge in their tanks, Moses called in an air strike. Jet fighters swooped down and **destroyed the bridge with smart bombs!**”

“Is that what your teacher told you? Asked the father, astonished.

“Not really, Dad,” said the little boy. “But you’d never believe her story!”¹

Just as this little boy had his doubts about the accounts of Moses, so too did Thomas in today’s gospel reading about the Resurrected Christ. Thomas doubted the other disciples when they shared with him that they had seen the resurrected Jesus. Just as the disciples had doubted Mary Magdalene when she had **shared the tomb was empty**. **Remember we had Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to see the tomb for themselves...** Thomas said to the disciples, in verse 25, “**Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and** put my finger in the mark of the nails and

¹ Alex Gondola. “Healthy Doubt - John 20:19-31” www.goodpreacher.com/11040

my hand in his side, I will **not believe.**” (John 20) For this statement, Thomas for centuries was known as “Doubting Thomas” and yet all we have to do is look at this story to see that he was not alone in his doubt. When Jesus first appears to the disciples in their locked seclusion in **verses 19 and 20 he shows them his hands and his side.** Further while the disciples have seen the resurrected Christ we see them still eight days later behind locked doors hidden away in fear. Our pericope provides examples of doubt spread equally amongst the disciples and yet it is Thomas, the one who voices the fear and doubt seen in the behavior of the larger group, that has for centuries been given the **bad rap of being the only doubter among them. Much** maligned Thomas and the rest of the doubting disciples actually provide a good example for the rest of us, though.

I am certain that if we are honest with ourselves we too can admit to times in which we **have doubted our faith in God. We have doubted** that God is present with us and for us. We have doubted that God hears our prayers. We have questioned and doubted God’s love for murderers, adulterers, thieves, the sinners around us... in essence we have doubted God’s love for us. If we are to be honest with **ourselves, most of us would have to admit** we’ve cried out to God and felt as though our pleas were in vain. We know what it is to experience those dark night of the soul times and we want some type of sign that God’s love and God’s promises are true. We need to know God is present with us.

We doubt and we want to see signs. As a society many folks are looking for signs that the economy is rebounding, the jobless rate is decreasing, the market is stabilizing, and the housing crisis is coming to an end. Folks who have found themselves grieving and in despair wondering where God is in the midst of all the pain around us are celebrating at the slightest sign that God has heard our **prayers and things are turning around. We are like Thomas.** We

want to touch and be touched by the resurrected Christ in our lives and particularly when we find **ourselves in crisis or in pain**. When that touch seems absent to us, we question and we doubt.

We must acknowledge here the healthy aspects of doubting. It helps us to separate out the wheat from the chaff – what’s worthwhile from **what’s worthless**. **“Faith is blind and dangerous if it asks us to stop asking questions and close our minds.”**² Let us not forget the tragedies that took place in Jonestown, Guyana, to the Branch Davidians in Waco, TX, the **Heaven’s Gate cult that committed mass** suicide so they could join up with a spaceship trailing the Hale-Bopp comet, followers of Fred Phelps’ Westboro Baptist Church, and alas the suicide bombers we hear about almost daily. **Clearly these groups needed or need a Doubting Thomas**. They each remind us of the dangers of blind, unquestioning faith. They are glaring reminders of the importance of struggling sometimes with “what is truth” (Jn. 18:38) and where **is God in our situation**.

As a people of faith we know that doubt is not our final destination. Doubt is a healthy part of our faith journey. Yet, doubt can also taunt us, drain us, and test us. But, it is in working through and thinking through our **doubts that we can actually grow individually** and as a community of faith.

Peace UCC went through the process of becoming Open and Affirming just last year. Throughout that process there were those who expressed their fears and doubts. Sadly, we know **that some members made the decision** to leave. But, it was in opening up to the possibilities of accepting folks into our doors that society would otherwise judge that many of you grew individually and you grew as a faith community collectively. The same could be said of our recent welcome of the **Narcotics Anonymous group**. **Some folks expressed** doubts to me and members of the council about whether or not Peace was ready to accept individuals struggling to

² Ibid, p.2

beat their addictions. I answered yes and through God's grace the members of our council did as well. **We are a loving and welcoming** group of people who daily seek to live by what we believe. We are willing to stretch ourselves and in turn stretch our faith.

Paul Tillich is a very well known theologian whose work is extensively studied at seminaries around the country, if not the world. One of his books entitled "Dynamics of Faith" explores the conflict between faith **and doubt**. "**Tillich argues that doubt is included** in every act of faith...Every act of faith recognizes that there may be a possibility for doubt."³ My sisters **and brothers, our doubts are** "overcome when we don't get stuck in them but try to work on through them. Doubts are overcome when we hang in there long enough to have some new experience of the Risen Christ. Because, just an instant spent in Jesus presence is worth all the intellectual proofs and well-reasoned **arguments in the world.**"⁴ **An instant in the comforting** and reassuring presence of the Risen Christ reminds us that we were never alone even in those times we questioned if God was present.

The disciples, even while in community with one another, in their grief and despair felt **alone. Jesus had been crucified. Even though they** had an encounter with the Risen Jesus on that Easter Sunday, they remained hidden and locked away. Just as the Risen Christ found them in their isolation and their doubt, he does the same for you and me. Our translation today tells us that Jesus appeared before the disciples, **except Thomas, showing them his scars** as well as sharing with them the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit as intercessor and comforter as well. Jesus comes to us and he touches us in the way that he knows **we will understand. It is in that moment** whether alone or in community we are reminded that he has not, nor will he ever leave us. **He says to us as he said to them,** "Peace be with

³ <http://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/tillich.html>

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3

you.... Do not doubt but believe” (Jn. 20: 26, 27) I believe Jesus was saying to them and to us, I see your doubt, **but you must continue to move through it.**

Thomas was touched by the Risen Christ and as a result of his encounter ceased being “Doubting Thomas” and became “Believing Thomas” proclaiming, “My Lord and My God!” (Jn. 20: 28) What the Risen Jesus offered Doubting Thomas was himself without rejecting, condemning, or criticizing him. What the Risen Jesus offers you and me is himself without rejecting, condemning or **criticizing us for our times of doubt. It is in this gift** of grace that we too can move forward into believing.

We encounter the Risen Christ individually and in community. We encounter the Risen Christ sometimes unexpectedly. We encounter the Risen Christ in the living word of the Bible, **through our prayers, at our baptism and when we partake of communion.** We are reminded that Christ is alive because Christ lives within us.

Christ is alive, Christ is real and knowing him is sweet. Doubt is inevitable in our lives but it is not our final destination. Doubt can be healthy and it can make us stronger. It helps us to sort out the wheat from **the chaff- that which is worthy from that which** is not. My sisters and brothers, our doubts are “overcome when we don’t get stuck in them but try to work on through **them. Doubts are overcome when we hang** in there long enough to have some new experience of the Risen Christ. It is in those experiences that we too may find peace and we too may cry out, **“My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28) Amen...**