

Sunday, April 7, 2013

## Doubt and Faith

Last week we celebrated. We were proclaiming Halleluiah. Christ is risen; death and sin are defeated. What is not to celebrate? Why wouldn't a person celebrate? Well, perhaps because it is so hard to believe. Let's face it, the overturning of what is the basic experience of life; that we all die and that is it, is hard to believe. Let's also face it, for many people eternal life, life after death is easier to believe than what Easter says about Jesus. After all, many religions, even people with no religion, often believe in life after death. But to believe that Easter has revealed Jesus, this carpenter from Judah, to be God incarnate? No wonder that the Easter joy is followed up by this story of doubt, after all this is our experience of this good news. Hearing the good news, in time leads us all into doubts.

It is Thomas, who expresses so well our doubts and our questions for us. First we have to recognize that it wasn't just Thomas who had his doubts. Our story begins with all of the disciples locked behind closed doors. All of the disciples were still caught in the fear that death and the treat of death brings. No one is out proclaiming the good news, they are hiding. Then Jesus appears, speaking precisely the words that these fearful disciples need "Peace be with you" Jesus then makes them apostles, that is people who are sent, and he breaths the Holy Spirit into them. But, Thomas wasn't there. You can almost imagine the apostles when Thomas arrived. You wouldn't believe who we saw? We have seen the Lord! It was Jesus he was alive. . . Yea, right. . . No he was right here, giving us peace, breathing God's Spirit into us. . . So you are seeing ghosts and hearing voice now? Thomas is an

empiricist. What intelligent person would believe such stories, without evidence, without concrete proof? “Unless I see the mark of the nail in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe”

“I will not believe. It seems to express our age quite well. We live in an age of growing disbelief. Weekly worship attendance, one of the best indicators of faith being an important part of life, has shown a steady decrease from 30 % in 1985 to 21% in 2005 and since then it has only gone down. What we have seen at the same time is a steady growth in is the number of people who are either atheists (don’t believe in God) or agnostic (no knowing what one believes). In the public media militant atheists are now prominent while if you read the comments on any article on line about religion it has shifted from disbelief to hatred and incredulity that any intelligent person would belief in religion.

Again and again what is held up in the public media is all the harm that has been done by people who are religious or in religion’s name. When we look at scientific beliefs, so often they seem to contradict what we have been taught, and what we think the Bible teaches. Even the bible itself, for many, seems full of contradictions. People have even made charts of all these things that they think are contradictions. And then in our own lives. When we begin to look seriously at our beliefs, so often there are parts of them that we realize that we struggle to believe any more. So often they seem to be in conflict with our experience of life, or like the resurrection of Jesus for Thomas, they can seem just like hopeful thinking. As a result, so often, when it really counts, our disbelief is such, that we find it hard to

either allow our faith to guide our life or to allow our faith to give us the hope we need to face life's challenges.

So what do we do with these doubts and questions? This is where scripture can guide us, especially this story of Thomas. The first thing to notice is that the inclusion of this story of Thomas, right in the heart of the Easter story, and the inclusion of Thomas as one of the 12, shows us that doubt is a part of faith, it is a part of our spiritual experience. Let's face it. People rising from the dead, that the least shall be the greatest, that in the end love is what it is all about. These are not things that our experience of life doesn't seem to support. Who wouldn't doubt these things?

What is also significant is that unfortunately for most people their understanding of faith has not progressed much beyond a Sunday school understanding of faith. When I listened to Hitchens, the noted Atheists' book, I was shocked that his understanding of Christian belief was about the equivalent of what one might learn from a poor Sunday school teacher. Then of course much of the public discourse about Christianity is not far from that level as well. Unfortunately, when I talk with people, both inside and outside the church, rarely is there an understanding of faith that is much beyond what one would hopefully learn in confirmation. No wonder, that when one begins to ask mature questions about one's Christian faith, that it can't stand up. It is like having a boxing match between an adult and a young teenager.

So what does scripture teach us about this? There is an interesting thing about Thomas. The disciples gathered on the first day of the week. One of the earliest post resurrection references to worship. And Jesus showed up. Who knows where Thomas was, why he missed the gathering that week. The result was that he missed experiencing Jesus, and he was filled with

disbelief. What is interesting is at the next weekly gathering Thomas came. Despite his doubts, despite perhaps feeling excluded from what happened, despite his questions or demands for proof, Thomas showed up, he kept at the hard work of gathering with the other disciples.

I wonder if we live in an age of disbelief precisely because we live in a culture of disengagement. When we have questions, doubts, or if we miss some experience of God, or feel bored, we don't respond by becoming more engaged or digging deeper, that is hard work, instead we tend to simply disengage and drift away. Sometimes disengagement isn't just about not showing up on Sunday morning. To make one's beliefs rigid, to deny the doubt or the questions or to avoid anyone with a different view, this is also disengagement as well, a kind of retreat behind fortress walls. The result is the same either way, one's understanding of Christ, more importantly one's experience of faith never has the opportunity of maturing.

That of course is not what Thomas did. He kept showing up, He kept engaging with the other disciples; he even spoke openly about his disbelief, so much so that it was recorded even until today. It was then, in the midst of his disbelief that Jesus showed up. It was then that Thomas experienced Jesus. And Jesus did not show up to chastise Thomas for his unbelief, Jesus did not come to reject him, rather he came to give Thomas exactly what he needed. Jesus came to invite Thomas to "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." What is interesting was that Jesus also did not respond with some doctrine or answer, Jesus invited Thomas to experience Jesus and the resurrection. Thomas's doubts became the gate way for Thomas's experience of Jesus. Then something profound happened. Through his doubt, which leads into his

experience of Jesus, Thomas responds by confessing “My Lord and my God”. It is this one line that is the climax of the Gospel of John. It is this, that the prologue of John, “In the beginning was the word the word was with God the Word was God . . .” leads up to. And it is right after this that John rights the purpose of this book , in verse 31 “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. <sup>1</sup>” Thomas’s doubt, leads him to experience God, his questions leads him to the insight that becomes the heart of the Gospel message. Depth begins with Doubt.

There is a Jewish saying that says it is by our questions and not our answers that we are led to God. This is also a part of the Christian tradition as well. I want to show you the medieval equivalent of this chart. It is Peter Lombard’s sentences. It was the basic theological text, that Luther and others studied. It takes two sentences of scripture that seem to contradict each other, and the task of the theologian was to work at them until they can understand the higher truth held the two together. This is the Christian equivalent of a Zen Cohen. It is a means by which the contradictions push the person to expand their mind and faith until it can expand a little more to grasp the fullness of faith that is the lived experience and trust in God. This is hard work.

One would never expect to get in shape by exercising once or twice a year. One of the complaints I hear from Susie is the number of people who have a completely unrealistic belief that that psychological or social patterns developed over a lifetime can be fixed with a pill or in a few weeks. When in reality it often takes years of hard work. If the development of our bodies,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 20:31). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

or the healing of our minds take such time and work, how much more does our spiritual growth, our growth of faith take both consistent and hard work over time. This is why showing up at church each week, why the daily study of scripture and daily prayer is so important if you want to grow and develop spiritually. One needs to stay engaged, right through ones' questions and struggles.

Now if exercise is worthwhile for our bodies which will all in time weaken and waste away, how much more worth it is the development of our spirits. What is important is that it is not just about us. Jesus showed up for Thomas, just for Thomas, just as Thomas needed him most. Often our questions and our doubts, they are in fact a gift from God. They are often God's invitation, to place our finger in his hand and our hands in his side. This though usually is hard work; it is the hard work of study, of thinking, and praying until we are open to receive what God wants to give us. For God doesn't want us to simply believe because we have been told something, God wants us to experience God, to experience God's life. God is inviting us, so come, let us put our finger in Christ's hands, and our hands in his side, and let us begin to live into this gift of eternal life.

Amen