

Welcome All Doubters

John 20:19-31

First United Methodist Church, St. Cloud, Minnesota

March 30, 2008

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Are people who have doubts about God welcome in the church of Jesus Christ? Last Sunday was Easter Sunday – a joyous day, a day to celebrate and affirm our belief in God, a God of hope as revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Easter Sunday we do not tell the story of doubting Thomas- yet perhaps more than any other Sunday of the church year we could find doubters among us.

Before we go any further, we dare not imagine that doubt is experienced only by unbelievers, by those who do not consider themselves people of faith or members of the body of Christ. As described by Os Guinness in his book entitled In Two Minds, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith, nor is it the same as unbelief; rather, doubt is a state of mind in suspension between faith and unbelief.” Guinness goes on to explain that doubt involves uncertainty and confusion, yet there remains a basic desire to believe.

I was surprised on a recent Easter Sunday to hear doubt expressed by my own 82 year old father. A couple Easters ago, my wife and I spent the weekend visiting my parents who live in Ames, Iowa. They have been faithful members of a very fundamentalist Baptist church for almost 50 years. Growing up in that church meant that I went to church every Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening. The sermons were not 15 minutes or 20 minutes or ½ hour, they were 45 minutes! Don’t worry, I quit preaching that long years ago!!

The preaching and teaching I heard as a child left no room for doubt – to be a believer meant total faith. If you had any serious questions or doubts about God, church was not the place to raise them. So it surprised me when my father, out of the blue, turned to me that Easter weekend and asked: “Randy, do you ever wonder if the story of Jesus is really all true?” My father asked that honest question not because he is an unbeliever, but because he is a believer who recognizes that the biggest test of his faith is getting closer each year – his own death.

It is the reality of death that often poses the biggest challenge for people of faith. Death can create doubt and uncertainty even about the things we most believe in. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his famous book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, described such an experience when he wrote: “Our son Aaron had just passed his third birthday when our daughter Ariel was born. Aaron was a bright and happy child, who before the age of two could identify a dozen different varieties of dinosaur and could patiently explain to an adult that dinosaurs were extinct. My wife and I had been concerned about his health from the time he stopped gaining weight at the age of eight months, and from the time his hair started falling out after he turned one year old. Prominent doctors had seen him, had attached complicated names to his condition, and had assured us that he would grow to be very short, but would be normal in all other ways. Just before our daughter’s birth, we

moved from New York to a suburb of Boston, where I became the rabbi of the local congregation. We discovered that the local pediatrician was doing research in problems of children's growth, and we introduced him to Aaron.

Two months later- the day our daughter was born- he visited my wife in the hospital and told us that our son's condition was called progeria, "rapid aging." He went on to say that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens. How does one handle news like that? I was a young, inexperienced rabbi, not as familiar with the process of grief as I would later come to be, and what I mostly felt that day was a deep, aching sense of unfairness. It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following God's ways and doing God's work. How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if God was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could God do this to me? And even if I could persuade myself that I deserved this punishment for some sin of neglect or pride that I was not aware of, on what grounds did Aaron have to suffer? It simply didn't make sense.

Like Rabbi Kushner, most of us were taught an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parental figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we are moral and hardworking people, God will reward us. If we get out of line, God will discipline us; basically we get what we deserve.

The first followers of Jesus believed this way. Thomas and the other disciples had left all to follow Jesus – they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the One sent from God to bring back glory and honor to Israel. They expected Jesus to share his glory with them. Instead Jesus had died. It wasn't fair. It didn't make sense. And where was God?

This kind of doubt and confusion has been part of religious experience since the time of Job. It is relived each time we read or hear of a modern Job - an individual who is good and kind, struck down by disease or killed in an accident. It isn't fair. It doesn't make sense. And where is God?

That is how I remember feeling at the counseling center where I worked when it was shared that the center's beloved receptionist had learned that her cancer had returned. Why should this cheerful, loving Christian woman, who had already suffered more than her share, have to suffer yet again?

Most of us here today have faced such questions of faith. Who among us cannot relate to doubting Thomas? Do we not all have times when we wonder about the unfairness of life, the inability to make sense of it all, and the feeling that God should be doing something about it. As a pastor and counselor I daily hear stories of heartbreak, pain and confusion. Stories about broken trust which shatters relationships and life-long dreams; stories about an unexpected and undeserved loss of job; stories about the struggle of living with a spouse's alcohol or pornography addiction; stories about watching

helplessly as one's life companion loses their memory and gradually slips away into their own world; stories of despairing parents whose children or teenagers grow increasingly defiant or distant; stories of both young and old whose lives have been disrupted and impaired by physical disease or emotional illness. We all know such stories and we have lived them. At such times, as people of faith, what do we do with our doubts and questions?

Many times as a pastor I have been present with parishioners going through crises and they were too afraid or felt too guilty to express their doubts or to ask their heartfelt questions. Sometimes it is especially hard to be honest within the community of faith itself. We sometimes share the unrealistic and unhealthy assumption that people of faith do not have the same problems that other people have. But, as Thomas and the other first disciples demonstrate, knowing Jesus does not mean a life without doubt or fear.

In his sermon on January 20 Pastor Bill pointed out that Thomas was not the only disciple who had a hard time after the death of Jesus. While Thomas didn't believe the other disciples when they told him Jesus was alive, earlier that day these same other disciples failed to believe the women who had come with the report that they had seen the resurrected Lord. And when Jesus himself appeared to these disciples, they were hiding upstairs in a locked room – as one commentator described them: “the friends who knew Jesus best, who had betrayed him, who had pretended they didn't know him, who had hid when he was arrested and run away when he was dying, they were now about to be confronted by Jesus while hiding, frightened and ashamed, behind locked doors.

What made Thomas different from the other disciples then was not that Thomas alone had doubts and questions- no, what made Thomas unique was that he was honest enough to express them. Perhaps his honesty was too much for the other disciples. We notice in the Gospel story that Thomas was not present with the other disciples at the first resurrection appearance of Jesus. Maybe Thomas made the other disciples too uncomfortable expressing his doubts and his questions. Later when the disciples came to Thomas with the news of having seen the resurrected Lord, they had to once again put up with Thomas' openness in expressing his feelings. It must have been difficult for them to hear Thomas' refusal to believe unless he personally saw and touched the wounds of Jesus.

Yet, we need to remember that when Jesus confronts Thomas, he does not chastise him for his doubts and demands. Instead, Jesus accepts Thomas just as he is and invites Thomas to come near. Jesus didn't appear threatened by or angry with doubting Thomas; rather, Jesus saw Thomas as one who was seeking, seeking a reason to believe, seeking some evidence to let hope be born anew, seeking to touch the One whose love had meant so much that proof was needed before love could once again be felt. Jesus helped Thomas to find all of that and more. Jesus offered himself to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.”

Jesus welcomed the doubting and seeking Thomas. And when Thomas saw it truly was the resurrected Jesus, he declared his faith anew, “My Lord and my God”—Thomas still did not understand everything – he still didn’t know why God had allowed such an injustice as Jesus’ death – but what Thomas did know was what mattered the most – Jesus was alive- death did not have the final word, in the end God was greater than evil and love was not in vain. Yes, Jesus welcomed the doubting Thomas into a world where God is present even when the world doesn’t make sense and we don’t have all the answers.

I witnessed this welcoming power of Christ in the first church I served in as a seminary intern 30 years ago. It was a church located in a town of about 10,000 people in rural northwest Iowa. During my months there one of the most active church families experienced a tragedy that was felt by the whole congregation. Their 9 year old son was killed by a car on the road in front of their farm house. It was devastating. What could the pastor and church members say or do to communicate their sympathy and care? While the church showered the family with words of love, casserole dishes, and offers of support, what I will always remember most from this experience was how the pastor and church family responded with nothing but love and understanding to the crisis of faith and the anger expressed by the parents. It took several months before these parents felt like returning to church – but never during those dark and difficult days did they experience anything other than acceptance and support from their church family. No matter how much they expressed anger toward God or doubt about the worth of their faith the pastor and people were there for them with unconditional love.

Likewise, as the body of Christ today, the church is called to continue welcoming all doubters – which at some time or another includes us all. For like Thomas we live much of our lives somewhere between faith and doubt. We are people of faith, we do believe the Gospel. But we also, like my father, cannot help but sometimes wonder just what it means to believe.

In Thomas we find the answer – to believe is to trust that the risen Lord is with us even when we do not fully understand what God is about – to believe is to know that Jesus loves us even when we express our doubt or demand more reasons to fully trust in him. To believe is to trust that in the end God will claim the victory over tragedy, injustice, pain and death – for us and for all creation.

That is what Thomas discovered and that is what Easter teaches us: God’s power to transform, to bring life out of death. Like the caterpillar transformed into a butterfly, God can transform us and move us from doubt to faith, from despair to hope. Hearing peoples’ stories of transformation and hope inspire me to continue my work as a pastor and counselor. I am regularly moved by how so many people have not only survived but grown through difficult times – parents who have stood by their children through years of

A Sermon by Revd Randy Johnson

defiance and disappointment; spouses who have grown in their love for one another through times when love and trust were tested and rebuilt; elderly saints who have become stronger in their faith during years of painful physical and emotional losses; and families who while suffering job loss and uncertain futures yet looked to God with hope and trust for a new opportunity. God's power to transform us in faith and hope is what brings us together in worship and what sends us forth with renewed commitment and strength.

And so let us sing praise and alleluia and in this way confess, with Thomas, our faith that Jesus Christ is our risen Lord and our God both now and forevermore. Amen!