

Gospel and Sermon

April 14, 2024: Third Sunday of Easter

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Jesus receives our doubts.”



Why do we doubt? Because sometimes we just can't believe what we're hearing. Because some days God seems absent. Because sometimes it's hard to believe that God loves us. Because sometimes life just punches us in the gut, and why would a good God allow that to happen? But what if doubt isn't a sign of weak faith? What if wrestling with doubt helps us grow in faith?

Gospel of Luke 24: 36b-48

In this account of an appearance after his resurrection, Jesus opens the minds of the disciples to understand him as Messiah. Jesus convinces them that he has been raised and sends them on a mission to proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone
“Jesus receives our doubts.”

So last Sunday, we heard the gospel lesson that some people call the story of Doubting Thomas. But let’s not judge Thomas. There is plenty of doubt to go around this week, too.

This week we’re in Luke’s gospel, not John’s like last week. It’s still the day of resurrection. The day the women went to the tomb and saw not Jesus’ body - but two men in dazzling clothes. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

The women tell all the other disciples, but are met only with doubt. The story seemed like garbage to everyone else, Luke tells us. Two of those disciples just head home to Emmaus, filled with doubt and grief, certain that all their hopes about Jesus had been in vain. A stranger meets them on the road and tells them a different story. Starting with the law and the prophets, he unfolds what scripture says about a suffering Messiah, not a conquering Messiah.

Those two disciples invite this stranger to stay awhile, sit down for a meal. And when he breaks the bread, their eyes are opened. They recognize this stranger is really Jesus, and he disappears.

And here we are this morning, all those disciples together again in one room, eating some broiled fish, wondering and maybe debating about the events of the day. Suddenly Jesus appears among them: “Peace be with you.”

Everyone jumps. Then freezes. What is happening?

“Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise within your hearts?” Jesus asks. “Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” We can hear this question in some different ways. We can hear Jesus saying: “You faithless disciples just don’t get it, do you? Why do you doubt? Don’t doubt. You need to believe.”

We can hear that. Or we can hear a little less judgment in Jesus’ voice and a little more curiosity: “I know you have doubts. Talk to me, and be honest: Why do doubts arise in your hearts?”

As people who have spent time in the stories of scripture, especially the stories of Jesus, we might be tempted to judge. Jesus told the disciples three times that this would happen. He would die and be raised. The scriptures have pointed to this happening. Now the risen Jesus is right there in front of them. Or is it a ghost? He appears and disappears. That’s something ghosts do, right?

Jesus sees those disciples’ doubts; he knows their doubts. But he doesn’t scold them. He offers them an invitation: Touch my hands and feet. I know you think I’m just a ghost. But look. Touch. Flesh and bone. Do you have something to eat? Let’s sit down for a meal, and I’ll explain everything. Besides, you know that ghosts don’t eat.

Jesus doesn’t despise or belittle the disciples’ doubts; he responds to them. “Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” What if Jesus asked you that question? Would you dare to respond?

“Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Well, because fewer people are coming to church, and we don’t know how to fix it. We’ve heard that we ought to be going out to those people instead of waiting for them to come to us, but we don’t know how to do that. And it sounds kind of scary.

“Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Because children are starving and dying in Gaza, and families are waiting and mourning in Israel, and Iran is launching weapons, and peace doesn’t seem possible. Where are you, God?

“Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Because our friend has died, and we had prayed so hard, and we were so hopeful that he would be healed. And at least some of us are kind of mad that he wasn’t.

Why do we doubt? Because some days God seems absent. Because sometimes it’s hard to believe that God loves us. Because sometimes life just punches us in the gut, and why would a good God allow that to happen?

Maybe you can’t even imagine saying something like that out loud. Maybe you’ve even been told that your doubts are sinful.

But what if doubt isn’t a sign of weak faith? What if wrestling with doubt helps us grow in faith?

Christian writer Rachel Held Evans grew up in a faith tradition that frowned upon doubts and questions. Rachel’s job as a good Christian was not to have questions. It was to have answers: answers to any question a skeptic or doubter or nonbeliever might hit her with.

And for a while she did. She had all the answers. But then she started having questions. too. In her book “Faith Unraveled,” she talks about the turning point in her faith - seeing a video of the public execution of a woman in Afghanistan. The woman had been accused of killing her abusive husband. She was a Muslim, and as far as Rachel knew, that meant she was going to hell.

But Rachel couldn’t wrap her head or heart around the idea that a good, loving God would demand that this woman who was tortured in life, then tortured in death, should also be tortured for eternity. Largely based on where she just happened to be born.

So Rachel started asking questions. And all the people with all the answers started getting really worried about her, and really uncomfortable around her. But Rachel kept wrestling. And as she asked questions, her understanding of God and God’s

love grew. Ultimately, faith that had been crumbling was renewed and even strengthened.

“After I’d thought for so many years that good Christians are always ready with an answer, it was a question that eventually drew me back to belief,” she wrote. “In the end, it was doubt that saved my faith.”

Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith. Doubt might just be a requirement for faith – a turning point, or a starting point.

Jesus meets those early disciples right in the midst of their doubts, right where they are. And then he helps them grow in faith and understanding.

He does the same for us. Jesus knows our doubts. He hears our questions. He will use them to help us grow in faith and understanding. Then he will send us out to meet other people right where they are, right in the midst of their doubts. Not to judge or convert, but to listen and love.

And through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be right there in our midst, opening our eyes, minds, and hearts to new understanding. Saying to us, “Peace be with you.” Inviting us to join him in a meal, to meet him at the table.

Pastor Jaime

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