**April 28, 2019**

**John 20:19-31**

Love may be the central message of scripture, but trust and doubt have got to be the central experience of people of faith. Doubt isn’t something reserved for those with weaker faith; doubt is common to everyone – from the least to the greatest. Adam & Eve knew God’s voice, yet they doubted when God said it was best they stay away from *that* tree. Moses followed God out of Egypt, yet *he* doubted when they wandered in the wilderness for too long. The Israelites continually doubted God’s presence and omnipotence, worshipping other gods whenever they were bored or dissatisfied. Jesus’ own disciples doubted *even while* they were face to face with our Savior… For every act of faith people have questions. Why? Why not? What if? and most important, “who are you?!”

Jesus’ disciples were burdened with doubt. They thought he was a good teacher. They were amazed by his miracles, but they didn’t fully believe who he was: Son of Man and Son of God. During his lifetime Jesus remarked that they had such little faith. He tried to teach them. He tried to show them, but they were overwhelmed by doubt. They couldn’t detect God’s holiness at work in the world.

Last Sunday, Luke’s Easter story told of the women at the tomb who didn’t believe (or understand) that Jesus would be resurrected from death. Why they returned to tell the 11 disciples the news of Christ’s resurrection, the 11 didn’t receive the women’s story with gladness. On the contrary! Ten of the disciples considered the women to be telling “idle tales” or just talking “nonsense” (depending on the translation). They definitely did not believe that Jesus was risen. Only Peter was curious. While he didn’t accept what the women said, he heard enough to want to know more, so he went to see the empty tomb for himself.

Later that Easter evening (as we read today) the disciples were still living in fear, locked away from the world when Jesus appeared to them. He showed the disciples his hands and side, then they rejoiced. Then they believed it was him. But Thomas wasn’t there. He didn’t get to see. And when the 10 disciples told Thomas that *they* had seen the Lord, Thomas maintained that *he* wouldn’t believe until he could also see for himself. Thomas wasn’t any different from the others; he just missed the initial meeting with Jesus. When Jesus returned to the disciples a week later, Jesus spoke directly to Thomas. “Touch me. Do not doubt but believe.” To which Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!” He faith was restored by recognizing Jesus. He saw and believed! This was the man he knew. This was the man he loved. But Jesus said to him, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet *still* believe.”

There’s no denying the power of our physical senses. Touching and seeing and smelling and hearing and tasting, are often what convince our hearts and minds to believe. My paternal grandmother famously said that she didn’t like to eat lamb, yet every Easter my mother would fix *her* family’s lamb recipe and serve it to my father’s mother saying that it was some other meat. And my grandmother loved it. Every year. It tasted good to her. She never doubted that it was pork roast. When our senses don’t work properly, or when they send us confusing or unbelievable information, we become discombobulated. Just like my grandmother, we can be convinced that one food is something completely different from what it really is. Or that we are touching a sheep when we are really touching a matted dog. Or that we are seeing a top-secret military aircraft instead of a UFO. Our hearts and our minds are reliant upon important sensory information to make decisions. Is something real? Is something true? Is something trustworthy?

Augustine of Hippo, a significantly influential theologian from the fourth century, wrote, “faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.” The disciples struggled to believe what they could see when Jesus was alive, let alone believe what they could not see. So when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection, he knew that *they* needed to see his crucifixion wounds. Had they been able to hear and trust in his prophecies of resurrection, they may not have been locked in a room in fear. Had they held faith in Jesus as Lord (and not Jesus as man), they may have had faith that he would triumph over death. And then, their faith would have been confirmed by what they saw. Instead, they continued to rely on their sensory experiences to confirm their faith.

For Christians today, living thousands of years after Christ, we cannot rely on our senses. Most of us aren’t waiting to see Jesus to believe in him. We largely accept the faith that has been shared with us. Our expressions of doubt come from more complicated emotional and intellectual places than initial sensory information. Our doubt comes when we don’t get a particular answer to prayer – so we ask, “does God hear me? does God care?” Doubt comes when science and reason are at odds with the unbelievable. Doubt comes when anger and fear take over our loving and spiritual hearts. Doubt comes in the shadow of depression when everything in life feels wrong and heavy – so we ask, “is God even real?”

Mother Teresa is considered a contemporary spiritual great. She was the woman to whom the world – Christian and otherwise – looked for deep faith. Her personal writings (published after her death), however, revealed her great struggles. She wrote in 1959, “Where is my faith? Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. My God, how painful is this unknown pain… I have no faith… So many unanswered questions live within me – I am afraid to uncover them – because of the blasphemy. – If there be God, please forgive me.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Mother Teresa was scared to even ask the questions, fearful of what monster might be lurking beneath the mystery.

But doubt isn’t always dramatic. Sometimes it is a passing “I wonder?” Sometimes it is the ignoring of what is actually present; sometimes doubt is simply self-absorption that can’t be derailed to see God right in front of your face. There is an old “Hagar the Horrible” cartoon wherein the Viking Hagar said, “It’s not easy to believe in you God. We never see you. How come you never show yourself? How do we know you even exist…?” In the next cartoon blocks we see a flower springing into life beside Hagar, then a volcano erupting in the distance, an eclipse of sun turning the sky black, a star shooting across the stratosphere, a tidal wave rushing over Hagar, lightning flashing, a bush beginning to burn, and a stone rolling away from the entrance to a tomb. Hagar then pulls himself from the mud, dripping wet, surrounded by darkness. “OK, OK. I give up! Every time I bring up this subject, all we get is interruptions.” God may be throwing a fireworks show in front of us – like the resurrection – but we don’t see it for our fear and self-absorption.

One of the best pieces of spiritual wisdom I’ve ever heard comes from Kathleen Norris, a contemporary author and professor. She shared a story about one of her student’s conversations with a Benedictine monk: The student asked, “What do you do when you can’t affirm certain parts of the [Apostles’] Creed?” Which is a common question asked by Christians who worship in churches like ours who publicly recite faith confessions each week. What do you do if you don’t believe or don’t understand the statement of faith? Can you be part of that (or our) community? The priest responded to Norris’s student, “Well, you just say it. It’s not hard. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart.” But the student didn’t like that response, and felt as though the monk had misunderstood his question, so he asked again, “What I am really asking is, how do you say the Creeds that contain things you don’t understand or believe?” And the priest said again, “You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believed it. Keep saying it. It will come to you eventually.” [[2]](#footnote-2) No one understands the Apostles’ Creed. No one understands the mysteries of faith, but we keep saying them, we keep telling the story to remind ourselves of God’s story and God’s promises… hoping and trusting that someday – in this lifetime or the next – we will see fully and believe with our whole hearts and minds *and* senses.

Huck is almost 2 ½ . He understands very little, but he is capable of learning. Just after Christmas our congregation sang a short refrain each week until Lent. “*Alleluia! Alleluia! in laetita. Alleluia! Alleluia! in laetita*.” Huck heard us singing it this story week after week, and he learned it. To this day, Huck sings “Ah nay new yuck. Ah nay new yuck” over and over and over again. 😊 He doesn’t *understand* what the words mean, but he does understand that the words are good and joyful and comforting. He sings this short Alleluia with determination, spreading the mysterious good news to whoever is in earshot – in the grocery store, in restaurants, in the park. “Ah nay new yuck. Ah nay new yuck.” And I hope that he will keep singing this Alleluia until he does understand it – until he knows that he is “*Alleluia*” praising God in “*Laetitia*” joy all day every day.

As Huck sings this short refrain, he points to Jesus’ comment about the kingdom of God belonging to children. Kids don’t understand stuff. They have lots of questions, but they don’t allow their curiosity or misunderstandings to paralyze them. Their questions propel them forward, asking more, asking new, exploring wider and wider.

There is no shame in not understanding. There is no shame in doubt or curiosity. Our faith is a jumble of mysteries. Whether we understand them or not, it is our job to keep saying them and sharing them with all the world. Jesus offered peace to the disciples and to Thomas – not shame, not exclusion or judgment. Jesus offered peace to them. He offered comfort to them. See. Touch. Believe.

One of the traditions of this first Sunday after Easter is to make it a joke day. Jokes are often what we do when we have fear or doubt or discomfort. I wonder what would happen if instead of covering up our confusion with an awkward joke, we were to honestly admit our questions. Instead of a “holy fools’ day” we could have a “curiosity Sunday.” Along those lines, today I am going to ask everyone to write down a question or curiosity, a doubt or a problem that you have with our faith. You don’t need to sign it or connect yourself to it in any way. Over the summer, I hope to use these in worship. I can’t promise any answers, but I can promise to carefully and respectfully honor the curiosities we each bring.

We can’t let our doubts and fears have so much power over us that they keep us locked up in fear (like the disciples after Christ’s crucifixion). Our questions and curiosities shouldn’t prevent us from going out and sharing our story. Instead, they should inspire us to keep listening and keep telling, hoping that *this* just might be the day when we understand or accept the gift that God has given us: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

1. Mother Teresa, Come Be My Light. Doubelday Religion and Crown Publishing, 2007. pg 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Norris, Kathleen. Amazing Grace. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)