

The Detour of Doubt 28/4/19 Kiama - John 20:19-31

Have you ever been driving along the street and you come to a detour? Maybe there is road works or an accident or something and you are not permitted to continue the way you wanted to go. You have to turn around or down a side street in a whole other direction. Sometimes it is a short loop, other times it costs you hours. I don't know whether it is my independent streak or whether it is a normal reaction, but I get quite put out when someone else decides where I should go!

What has been your experience? Have you ever found yourself maneuvered or pushed into a spot you didn't want to go or stay in? – parked in a spot – job – idea where over time you have become uncomfortable.

Sometimes the things we were taught in Sunday School have stuck to us and we haven't asked questions or kept searching. What were you taught about Thomas for example. "Doubting Thomas" is what I was taught to call him. "Don't be like Doubting Thomas! So we sing "Not a doubt nor a fear, not a sigh nor a tear will abide while we trust and obey."

But you know, the older I have become and the more I have learned by study and experience, the more I dislike being maneuvered into that parking place and the more I want to revise my opinion of Thomas. In fact, there are some things I want to point out about this old, familiar story of Doubting Thomas today that I hope will keep us from parking our beliefs prematurely about him and his legacy.

I hope we'll see from Thomas' story is that doubt is not always such a bad thing. In fact, as Dr. Bill Self notes: "...I must admit that there is a place in the Christian life for honest doubt, for doubt is always the prelude to faith."^[i]

If you think about the great prophets and saints, Moses and Jeremiah and so on, you'll find plenty of evidence of doubt. It's not uncommon at all. It's there, in all the greatest and most faithful lives. I wonder if maybe you can't really possess the fullness of a great and vigorous faith until through doubt, you've examined it, and you've struggled with it, and you've worked for it.

In some ways Jesus himself was a doubter, from a certain perspective. At least he knew how to employ it creatively for the life of faith." He doubted that the long prayers and rigid dietary laws and cleanliness codes of his religious tradition were essential to faith. So he talked about practicing an honest, simple, faith. He doubted that Samaritans were of less inherent worth than others, so he told the parable about the Good Samaritan and the neglectful priest.^[ii]

So, yes, maybe the capacity to doubt **is** the prelude to establishing vital, meaningful faith commitments. Have you had the privilege of struggling with a few faith-shaping

doubts of your own? I hope so. I think most of us have...and so we ought to have some sympathy and respect for Thomas.

This story of Thomas, is only in the Gospel of John. And by the time the writer of John's Gospel records this story, it is from a distance of around seventy years after Jesus' death--a time when Jewish and Gentile Christians were experiencing tremendous persecution from the Romans. Certainly, those Christians were doubtful frequently about the wisdom of having adopted this faith. The risks were great, and many of them were tempted to go into hiding for their own self-protection.

The disciples of Jesus are afraid, they are second guessing their own decisions to follow Jesus. They are doubting the things Jesus taught them. Was it all for nothing? Is this new understanding of their faith worth it? So they hide out in a room, with the doors securely locked to protect them. Thomas for some reason is not with them when Jesus appears amongst them. When he returns he is very sceptical about their assertions that the risen Christ had been there.

And why was he doubtful? Because he wants proof in the form of empirical verification. But what's wrong with that? Wouldn't you want proof? In our scientific age we have all been trained to verify through sensory experience, empirical evidence. Thomas actually stands as a pivotal figure in the Christian story precisely because while all the disciples before him *did* get to see and touch and hear Jesus directly, the millions of us who come after Thomas *don't* have that opportunity. So you see, a new phase, or new stage of church life and faith begins with this story of Thomas. Thomas stands at a transition point.

Did you notice how Jesus responds to Thomas' demand for proof? He doesn't rebuke him for wanting it. Indeed, Jesus gives him what he needs for faith--he lets him see and touch. But then Jesus goes on to say for the benefit of all of us who will follow Thomas and hear of this story, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen, and yet have come to believe." That line is intended for us, of course, we who cannot see, cannot verify, cannot amass proof, and yet are invited to the blessings of faith in Jesus Christ, nonetheless.

So our question for today is: "what do we need in order to believe?" How is it possible for us to believe, if we don't get what the disciples and ultimately even Thomas got? You might ask yourself, what is the basis of your belief? Have you had some experience, some insight, read something, heard something, seen something? What? How can you believe, especially when maybe like Thomas, you've already been disappointed or disillusioned, and the last thing you want to do is foolishly

believe in another impossibility? Is belief in something you cannot fully verify just wishful thinking? Is it just grasping at straws?

I love the story Father Henri Nouwen shared about an experience that helped him with that question. Nouwen was a fan of the Flying Rodleights, who were German trapeze artists. Nouwen, a Catholic priest, says that he greatly admired these acrobats and they befriended him and even let him practice with them on the trapeze.

Once, Nouwen recalls, he asked the leader of the troop about flying through the air. He said, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air...I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me...The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there for him." [\[iii\]](#)

Life is like the flyer on the trapeze. We are spinning and swirling through life, unable to see where we are headed. We can't see or touch or prove the existence of a catcher who won't let us fall. Regardless, we have to learn to reach out our hands and believe that we will be safely caught and held. Blessed are those who cannot see, yet who have come to believe, because sometimes reaching out in faith, unseeingly, but trustingly, is really the only way open to us.

True, we may not get the empirical proof we'd like--the kind Thomas demanded. But really, we don't have that kind of proof for any of the things that are most important to us, do we? How can we conclusively prove love or friendship or hope? We can't. But we know they exist. We feel them. And day by day, and even moment by moment, we need to hold out our hands and just trust we'll receive them.

The thing I noticed this time around in this Gospel reading is that Thomas wasn't with his friends in the room the first time Jesus appeared. Where had he gone? Why wasn't he there? Did he go to get supplies? Did he pop out to visit his family? Why wasn't he there? Maybe he had lost hope and left the group only to miss out on seeing the risen Jesus. But he came back and was granted all he needed for belief when he came back and stood among his fellow disciples.

I'm coming to think that the most important part of what this Gospel story is teaching us is that we will find the assurance we need for belief most readily in the fellowship of others. And if we are to brand Thomas as having been faithless, then his faithlessness did not lie only in doubting Jesus' resurrection. His faithlessness also

lay in his unwillingness to stay with his friends and trust and believe with them and in them. And that's always a problem.

Rev. King Duncan once told the story of a 97-year-old woman who, looking back, said she had learned the most important lesson of her life when only a child. She and a group of friends had decided one afternoon to climb Mount Washington in New Hampshire. Before they were able to descend, a late afternoon fog rolled in and enveloped them all in its thick, obscuring whiteness. They couldn't see the way ahead, and so they agreed they would move down the mountain very slowly, inch by inch. And they agreed they would all hold hands and they would not, under any circumstances, let go of each other. Remembering the event years later, the woman said of this experience: "Sometimes all I could see was the hand ahead of me and the one behind me. Sometimes my arms ached so badly I thought I would cry out loud, but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another." [\[iv\]](#)

What a metaphor for the significance of maintaining durable and trusting relationships with other searching and faithful people. Of course we'll still undergo the challenges of those girls on the mountainside. Sometimes we might even get lost. Sometimes we'll be strained to stay together, strained by our differences, though we share a faith. Sometimes we'll be unwilling or unable to trust what the others are telling us or to credit their insights into the way ahead. But if we can hang together, we can cover some pretty rough terrain, safely and securely.

It is an honour to be part of the Christian church and the church family. I frequently see people supporting one another in their grief, or illness, or unemployment. So often I have witnessed people celebrating the birth of a child together, or someone coming to faith and we have all rejoiced. I've watched them open their hearts and their wallets to the victims of natural disasters. And I have watched the diligence of Christ's people in staying close to one another for good in a thousand other ways besides, across the years--trusting that all that effort and irritation and expense and risk were worth it.

And what's the payoff? It's that being in one another's company, doing the work of faith together is where we all encounter the healing, loving, breathing spirit of Christ. Thomas learned that when he came back to the upper room and encountered the risen Christ with the others.

So, Thomas the proof-seeker doesn't deserve to be parked in the dismal and unredeemable category of "Doubter," I don't think. Because do you know what happens after the scene we read about today? Do you know what Thomas does next? He gets up out of that locked room where he and the others found the proof they needed of Christ's spirit alive and well, and he went out to serve in that spirit, tradition tells us, until his death--fearlessly and with utter conviction!. He had the

tenacity to seek until he found and the courage to live the rest of life fully trusting in the glory and grace of God which he glimpsed that day.

What a gift that kind of faithful courage can be. Bishop William Willimon tells of once visiting a man with only a couple of days left to live. He asked the man whether he was fearful. To Willimon's surprise the man replied, "Fear? No! I'm not fearful because of my faith in Jesus." The man continued, explaining, "I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed and gotten lost. And time and time again, he found a way to get to me, looked for me when I wasn't looking for him. I don't think he will let something like my dying defeat his love for me."^[v]

What could get in the way of God's love for you? Closed doors? Doubts? Demands? No, of course not. Illness, hardships, failings, mistakes? No, nothing can separate you from God's love!

The challenge, then, is just to trust in that and live in light of that, even when we cannot always see it or feel it. Maybe in remembrance of blustering Thomas, we all just ought to widen our standards of proof, to encompass the truth of all the wondrous ways God's love already has, and is, and will come to us...until we can say with joyful conviction: All I have seen teaches me to trust God for all I have not yet seen. Let's not get ourselves steered into any other, smaller conclusion. Let's not settle for parking our minds and our beliefs anywhere else than in the assurance of God's eternal, unconquerable love for us! Amen.

^[i] Dr. William Self, "Doubt: The Prelude to Faith," Day1, April 15, 2007, Second Sunday of Easter.

^[ii] Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke, "The Good News About Doubt," House of Hope Presbyterian Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota, April 11, 2010, Second Sunday of Easter.

^[iii] Robert A. Jonas, "Henry Nouwen: Spirituality and Practice," Orbis Books, 1998, found at: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=17109>

^[iv] King Duncan, "The Dachshund Dilemma", Luke 4:14-30, ESermons.

^[v] William H. Willimon, "The Best of William H. Willimon: Acting Up in Jesus' Name," Abingdon Press, 2012

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