

Sermon: "Doubt"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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DOUBT

Today's sermon is about doubt. What was it Carl Sandburg said about the fog, that it creeps in on "little cat feet"? I sometimes think that doubt comes in the same way. Doubt comes creeping into our life. One day we wake up and realize that we're not as sure as we once were about our faith.

Doubt comes in many forms. Sometimes people begin to doubt because someone in authority fails them. Quite often when a religious leader fails a person, that person begins to have doubts about their faith as well.

This past week I heard that there is a new play being produced on Broadway. It's about the moral lapses of a few Catholic priests that have received so much notoriety in the past few months. The title of the play? Doubt.

Much to my chagrin I know that I have been at least partially responsible for the doubts of some people because of my personal failings in some area. And sometimes people transfer their doubt about failed leaders to a generalized doubt about the promises of God. When I talk with people who do not attend church, they will often say to me, "I don't go to church because the people who go there are all hypocrites. If they really believed what they say they believe, they would act differently."

Certainly there is some truth in that statement. We sing that old campfire song, "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love" but I'm afraid that our witness to the kingdom is mixed at best.

Our actions do not always witness to the faith we profess. Deep down inside we know this to be true. And that leaves us in a fearful and unsettled state. Not only do we cause others to doubt. We ourselves have grave doubts as well.

LOCKED DOORS

I think that's the state in which we find the disciples today. They are not only uncertain and in doubt about the message of Jesus; they are also in doubt about their own lives and where they would go next. They had failed miserably when the test of the cross came. All of them ran away in fear when the time of testing came.

The Bible tells us that the doors to their house were locked for fear of the Jews. But, I would contend that they were afraid of more than just the Jews. Life itself had become a terrifying prospect for those early disciples.

They were in doubt about everything. The door to their house was locked and so was the door to their life.

Are the doors to your life locked as well? Are you keeping everyone out of your life because you are afraid of what may happen next? Sometimes the effect of unresolved doubt is a much more devastating problem than anything someone else might do to us. Doubt not only keeps us from contact with those who might help us. Doubt also keeps us locked away from the presence of the Lord.

FAITH AND DOUBT

The Bible is not silent about doubt. Indeed, from one standpoint, every story in the Bible is about doubt and how to deal with it.

According to the Bible, faith is the opposite of doubt. Faith is the ability to believe in God's grace even when the worst happens. In the Bible faith is defined as the "assurance of things hope for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Faith is defined as believing that God will deliver us when we are in the wilderness or when the enemy approaches.

All the stories of the Bible are about people learning to have that kind of faith in difficult times. Always doubt is the crucible in which new faith is born.

According to our lesson for today the whole gospel of John was written for this specific purpose. In John 20:31 we read that everything in this gospel was 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.”

This verse suggests that coming to faith is always a journey and a struggle. That struggle has always been illustrated very well for me by a story from the gospel of Mark.

It seems that there was a boy who was possessed by a “demon”. The Bible talks about how he foamed at the mouth, rolled on the ground, and ground his teeth. It sounds a lot like some kind of seizure to us, but to the ancients who had no clue about modern medicine, it must have been a terrifying sight.

The father of this boy was desperate for a cure. The disciples had no luck in effecting a cure so when Jesus came, the father was understandably skeptical about Jesus’ power to heal. The father in his desperation said,

“If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

And Jesus replied, “What do you mean, if you can?” Everything is possible for him who believes.” And I think the reply of the father is one we all can identify with if we’re honest. He said, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

The father gave Jesus two answers. “I believe. But, I also have some doubts. I need help.” That’s the way it is with us, all of us.

Some of the strongest Christians I know are Christians who have enough faith to be honest about and struggle with those nagging uncertainties. They are able to say,

“Lord, I have some doubts. I need help.” Recognizing and attempting to deal with our doubts can be the first step toward a deeper and more meaningful faith.

Quite often I believe that God even uses our doubts to help us grow in faith. Doubts can keep us from believing in a God that is too small. Doubts can move us to a greater understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And, most importantly, doubts can prepare the way for us to have an encounter with the Spirit of Christ.

THOMAS

That's what happened with Thomas.

We learned in our lesson for today that Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them the first time. They told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, but Thomas was not inclined to believe such a thing. After all, who ever heard of a resurrection? Nothing like this had ever happened before, and he wasn't going to believe in anything like that without evidence.

And so, Thomas had his doubts about the disciple's story. He said, "I don't know what you guys saw, but I'll tell you this, I won't believe until I see for myself. Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas had a point. Belief must, in the final analysis, be based upon personal experience. A second hand faith was not good enough for Thomas. He wanted to see for himself. He wanted to make his own decision.

I think that's a good thing. We can't believe just because it is a family tradition to believe. There must come a time when we make faith our own. There must come a time when we too have an encounter with the Spirit of the risen Christ. There must come a time when we believe because His Spirit has changed us from the inside out.

This happened with Thomas. The Scripture tells us that Jesus came to the disciples a second time, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but that was no hindrance for the risen Christ. He stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

And then Jesus gave Thomas a personal invitation to believe. He said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Belief was easier for Thomas than he imagined it would be. He did not have to accept the invitation of Jesus to put his finger in the nail scarred hands or put his hand in Jesus' side where the sword had been thrust. In the presence of the risen Christ, Thomas simply fell to his knees and said, "My Lord and my God!"

The Bible tells us that this story was written for our benefit. It was written to encourage all who struggle to believe in the face of doubt.

Perhaps some of you feel guilty because you have doubts. But, doubting in and of itself is not the problem. It's what we do with our doubt that makes the difference. Frederick Buechner had this to say about doubt, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you're either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

DESTRUCTIVE DOUBT

But, though doubts can help us grow in the faith, they can be very destructive as well, especially when they're expressed by someone who is not an honest doubter.

There is a group of radically liberal scholars who are a part of a group called the Jesus Seminar. Their stated aim is to paint a picture of the real, historical Jesus as opposed to what they think is a distorted picture that is painted in the gospels. One belief that they all reject is the notion of the resurrection.

For example, Dominic Crossan wrote, "I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life." Another member of that society was even more blunt when he said, "Jesus, regardless of where his corpse ended up, is dead and remains dead." Bishop Spong gets more "spiritual" in

his unbelief. He suggests that the essence of the resurrection was Peter's experience of seeing Jesus as the in breaking reality of God.

These characters are very popular on the college circuit these days. It seems like some schools are bound and determined to tear down the faith of their young charges even as some of them take money from church people to pay their bills!

But, I would remind these scholars that their work is not that original.

The disciples could have well been charter members of the Jesus Seminar. They were in no mood to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead either. The first witnesses to the resurrection doubted, ran away in fear, and resisted doing what Jesus charged them to do.

The disciples were not as impressed by the teachings of Jesus as Bishop Spong and some of the others suggest. They never found an eternal, "resurrection truth" in what he said. Quite often they didn't know what Jesus was talking about, so much so that Jesus was downright amazed at their lack of faith.

If there is one iota of truth to the main thrust of the gospels, we cannot think of Jesus as just a great teacher. If we take Jesus' own words seriously, we have to say that Jesus either was who he said he was, the Son of God incarnate who died for our sins and was raised from the dead for our justification or he was a nut case. Jesus is either the risen Lord or we (as the apostle Paul put it) are a pathetic lot who should be pitied for our misguided faith.

THE PROOF OF CHANGED LIVES

But, consider this. Thomas and Peter and John and all the other disciples who were huddled behind locked doors long ago made a radical and mysterious change in the way they did business. They didn't stay behind those locked doors out of fear after they encountered the risen Christ.

No, they went out into Jerusalem and confronted the very people who crucified Jesus. Not only that, through the power of the Spirit, many of those former enemies of Jesus became believers. Those fearful apostles endured terrible persecution and went all over the world spreading this strange new belief that in the death and resurrection of Jesus God was present in a new and decisive way.

There were doubting intellectuals in their day as well. They laughed out loud when they started talking about a crucified God who rose from the dead. What kind of God was that? Unbelievable.

But, these disciples did not let any of that stop them. They obviously had seen something that changed everything. They obviously believed in the resurrection. They believed it so much that they finally actually did what Jesus charged them to do. They went into the entire world bringing the message.

Tradition tells us that most of them died bringing that message to the world. I ask you, would they have died for a belief they knew to be a sham? A man or a woman might die for a good cause, but I have never heard of anyone dieing for something they knew to be a lie.

No, the Spirit of the risen Christ is loose in this world even today. When we say he is risen, we are talking present tense. There are disciples even today who are going into the world spreading the gospel because they, in their own way, have seen the risen Christ.

Look at the names of those whom we pray for each week, the missionaries who serve in places that are often dangerous. Why do they do that? Why do they leave the comforts of this country? Why do they dare to bring their families into harms way and seemingly waste their lives in these remote out of the way places?

I'll tell you why. They have seen the risen Christ. They have heard his call to spread the message to the whole world. They believe, and that changes everything.

Yes, Christian leaders will backslide and fall from grace. Good people will do bad things. And sometimes wolves parade around in sheep's clothing. Such things make us doubt.

But, we must remember we are not charged to follow some charismatic man or woman. We are charged to follow Jesus, the risen One who is alive now and forevermore. We are charged to follow the one who breaks down barriers of fear and hatred and prejudice. We are charged to look at the hands and side of the one who was "bruised for our iniquity" and be amazed by the pure grace of his presence among us even today.

A church group in a university town was having a discussion on the topic of "difficult Christian beliefs." In due time, someone mentioned the difficulty of believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Many found the idea rather farfetched. How could a dead body rise from the tomb? It's never happened before?

A woman spoke up. She said, "Well, I do believe in the resurrection. I've seen it. I've lived it. When my husband walked out on me, I could have died. I did die. My life was over. Dead end.

But, then, by the grace of God operating through the coaxing of good friends, I came back. I came to life. I got a whole new life. It was a miracle.

I believe in the resurrection. I've lived it."

JESUS COMES TO US IN OUR DOUBT

I must admit to you that even after all these years of studying the Bible and all these sermons on faith, I am still, at times, a doubting Thomas. I am discouraged by the sadness of losing good friends and the tragedy of lives

broken by despair and deceit. I dwell too much on the ways that I fail myself and others. I forget to think about the ways that God has delivered me in days gone by.

But, it is precisely during those times, when my house of faith seems to become a house of cards that the Lord comes to me in a new way. Sometimes a person who seemed broken beyond repair comes back to live a new life. Sometimes there is the unexpected kindness or the undeserved gift.

You just never know from what direction it will come. The resurrected Jesus is not limited in any way. He comes to us in many forms. His Spirit invades our world of despair and anger with a word of peace and hope.

PREPARE THE SAILS

When Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary, first went to China, it was in a sailing vessel. Very close to the shore of the Cannibal Islands the ship was caught in a calm, and it was slowly drifting toward the shore -

The captain came to Mr. Taylor and sought him to pray for the help of God. "I will," said Taylor, "provided you set your sails to catch the breeze." The Captain declined to make himself a laughing stock by unfurling the sails in a dead calm.

Taylor said, "I will not undertake to pray for the vessel unless you will prepare the sails."

I think that faith is being willing to unfurl our sails and expect the wind of God's Spirit even when there seems to be a dead calm.

You never know when the risen Christ will come among us. We need to be ready.

May God help us stop doubting and believe.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN