

“Doubt in the Family of Faith”

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

31 But these are 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.

DOUBT IN THE FAMILY OF FAITH

“Doubt in the family of faith.”

That sounds “like” a downer of a sermon title for the second Sunday of Easter doesn’t it?

Surely, the last thing a preacher wants to do is inject a note of doubt into Eastertide.

What’s wrong with me?

Why can’t we just keep singing hallelujahs?

Why do we have to talk about doubt?

Why can’t we just keep talking about the stone being rolled away?

Why can’t we just keep talking about the message of the angel?

Why can’t we just keep saying, “He is risen!”

Well, we can, and we will.

Easter is not just one Sunday.

Easter is season.

But, that’s not all we’re going to say.

Because it’s not the whole story.

As we learned last week,

sometimes even an empty tomb and the word of an angel is not enough to produce faith.

The road to faith is seldom a straight smooth superhighway.

The road to faith is often a narrow rocky path

that goes through the twin peaks of doubt and despair.

Sometimes we see and believe.

And sometimes, like the women who found the empty tomb in Mark’s gospel,

...we run away and tell no one
...because we are so afraid.

Instead, of giving a bold testimony of faith
...our story ends in the middle of a sentence.

Who would believe what we have to say
when we're not even sure what we believe?

Throughout the Bible, the story of faith is filled with ups and downs.

Sometimes God's people are faithful.
But, more often than not they're afraid.
And filled with doubt.

Or even worse, they distort God's message,
and do the exact opposite of what God wants them to do.

They substitute ritual for justice and righteousness.

It breaks God's heart.
And it brings heartache to God's people.

COME TO BELIEVE

So if we see this pattern throughout the Bible,
if this struggle between faith and doubt is even a part of the resurrection
stories,

...why do we so often deny our own doubts and fears?

Maybe we're afraid of what other Christians might say.

I've seen that before.

Someone in a Bible study expresses a sincere doubt or fear,
and someone else in that Bible study quickly says,

"If you only believe sister,
if you only have enough faith,

then you can banish those doubts.”

Now that sounds good.
That sounds very pious.
Trouble is, it's just not true.

Doesn't work that way.

Psychiatrists call this repression.
When there's a fact that we don't want to face,
we push it down deep inside.

And you know what eventually happens?
One day that pesky doubt comes to the surface.
And the anger and fear become stronger than ever.

John gives us the purpose of his gospel in our lesson for today.

In John 20:31 we read that this gospel was written so that we may

“come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing” we may have life in his name”.

The important phrase is “come to believe”.
It's a process.

That's true for all of us...preachers, elders,
Stephen ministers, Sunday school teachers,
seasoned Christians and those who have just come to the faith.

It's a process.

There will be ups and downs in our story
just as there were ups and downs in the lives of the people we read about
in the Bible.

MAGICAL THINKING

And if someone tries to tell you any different,
if they tell you that if you just have “faith” that you're in for smooth sailing

...financially, spiritually and emotionally.

Don't believe them.

It's not biblical.

And it doesn't square with what we experience in our own life.

It's not real.

Most heresies, ancient and modern, spring from this magical belief system. If we just do the right ritual or say the right words, all will be well with our soul.

We will not struggle with doubt and fear.

We will win the victory.

This is what the false prophets preached in the Old Testament, and this is what false prophets preach today.

Those who promote this hyper-positive religion will be popular, but they will not lead people to a faith that endures.

Why? Because the time comes when doubt enters every life.

And if the seed of faith was planted in the shallow soil of magical thinking, it will be choked out by the weeds.

Over the years I have come believe that this struggle between faith and doubt needs to be a part of every sermon... because its a part of every life.

We can only come to faith if we're honest about the struggle to believe.

It's a process.

DOORS LOCKED OUT OF FEAR

Sometimes when I read the Bible, I'm discouraged by how puny my faith is in comparison to the faith of the early church.

The resurrection caused people to radically change how they lived.

There are some good examples of that in our lectionary lessons for today.

Those who were near the resurrection responded with miraculous generosity.

In the book of Acts we read,

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possession, but everything they owned was held in common."

Sometimes we see expressions of faith (and doubt) in how we deal with our material blessings. But, most of us do not ever approach the level of faith shown by some of those early Christians.

Why? Why can't we be more generous?
Why are we so different from the early church?

There are other ways that we seem to be quite different from those early Christians.

Those near the resurrection also responded to the good news with breathtaking forgiveness.

According to our passage for today, this was the work of the Spirit.

Jesus breathed his Spirit of forgiveness into the disciples. The Spirit helped them forgive and not "retain" sins.

Crucifixion can leave disciples with a lot of anger and fear and doubt. That was true for those first disciples.

Our Scripture tells us that the doors to the room they were in were locked out of fear
...fear of the Jews.

I think it's interesting that John tells us the group that the disciples were afraid of.

They were afraid of the Jews.

Now some Jewish leaders did things that would cause the bravest heart to fear.

They had Christ crucified.
They set out to murder Lazarus
because his resurrection testimony was just too powerful.

No doubt they would soon be hunting down all the disciples in order to kill or persecute them too.

But, the story is complex.
Not all Jews rejected Jesus.
Some became his followers.

Nicodemus, the disciples, the crowds
...they were all Jews.

And, of course, we sometimes ignore the obvious. Jesus was a Jew.

But, fear makes no distinction.
Their fears were generalized to "the Jews".

The same thing happens today.
Fearful things might be done by immigrants or white people or black people. But, does that mean that we have to keep the doors of our life locked for fear of everyone in that group?

The risen Christ said no.
He was able to blow right through those doors that were locked by fear and anger and doubt.

I have seen breathtaking examples of forgiveness in the church.

Instead of retaining sins, the Spirit enabled some to forgive when we thought forgiveness was impossible.

But, unfortunately this is often the exception instead of the rule.

Jesus may have breathed the Spirit of forgiveness into that early community of faith, but often the church today seems a bit breathless when it comes to forgiveness.

For every heroic tale of forgiveness there seems to be a hundred examples of us holding on to sins...the sins that have been committed against us and the sins we have committed against others.

We act like we are powerless in the face of sin,
that we have not been given the authority to forgive and be forgiven.

We say each week,
“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”
But, saying it and doing it are two different things.

Why?

Why can't we be more forgiving?
Why can't we be more generous?
Why can't we be more faith filled?

It seems to me that we too need a visit from the risen Christ.

THE PEACE OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE

When the risen Christ came to his disciples, he brought them the gift of peace.
That's the first thing he told the disciples when he charged through those locked doors.

“Peace be with you.”
But, not everyone heard that greeting the first time.

Thomas was not in the room.

And when the other disciples breathlessly told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!”
Thomas said in effect,

“What have you boys been smoking?
I've got to see it for myself before I believe.
I'll need to put my hands in the nail scarred hands.
I'll have to put my hand in his side where he was wounded by the sword.”

Thomas didn't believe because he hadn't seen.
And maybe that's why we have trouble believing as well.

Maybe we have trouble living the life that Christ would have us live because we have not experienced the presence of the risen Christ in our life.

...At least we haven't experienced it like those first disciples.

If someone would tell us that they saw Jesus last night, and that Jesus told them personally to say something or do something,

How would we respond to that?

We'd respond just like Thomas.

We would say,

"How did you know it was Jesus?"

Why did you get a little visit from Jesus while the rest of us were left out?

I don't believe.

I'll have to see it for myself."

BELIEVING AND NOT SEEING

If we all need to put our hands in the nail scarred hands before we believe, we're in trouble. Because I don't think anyone has had that experience since Thomas had it long ago.

Why do I say that?

Look at verse 29. After Thomas has an opportunity to see the risen Christ, he believes. He responds, "My Lord and my God."

And Jesus asks, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

I think that last line is important.

None of us have had Thomas' experience.
We are among those who have not seen.

So how can we believe?
Thinking about Thomas' story together can help us come to believe.

According to John, that's the reason we have his story and all the other stories in the Bible.

The whole point is to help us have faith, and a new way of life. (20:31)

I would suggest that Thomas' story is our story.
We too have doubts.

Sometimes when others seem so certain about their faith, and we seem so uncertain, we feel isolated.

We wonder if there's something wrong with us
...or if there's something wrong with them.

I think the church should be a community where folks can honestly express their doubts and their faith.

And Thomas' story suggests that if we stick together and support each other, the peace of Christ will come into our life in a new way.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Notice, that even though Thomas doubted the disciples' story, he didn't leave the group.

A week later the disciples were in the same room and Thomas was still with them.

And Christ once again walked through a door locked out of fear in order to be with his disciples and especially Thomas.

The disciples had a lot to fear.

They had a reason to lock their doors.

There were some religious and political leaders who really were out to get them.

And the world we live in is not all that different.
The news is awash with, evil, death and dying.
Each news cycle we learn a new reason to lock our doors.

If we're not afraid, if we don't have doubts,
we're either asleep or kidding ourselves.

So, how do we respond to all that bad news and the doubt that it brings?

The family of faith responds by looking to the wounds of Jesus.

According to John's gospel, the cross was no accident.
Jesus took on evil and injustice, but he didn't do it on the world's terms.

Instead, in all humility he disarmed violence through nonviolent resistance
on a cross.

He defeated enemies by publicly exposing their evil ways on the cross and
then forgiving them.

He responded to the desertion of his disciples by coming back to them.

He helped those who doubted to believe.

THE SPIRIT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

And now that's our job.
In our lesson for today, Jesus told his disciples.
"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
And then he breathed upon them.

The disciples were give the Spirit of the risen Christ.
In Christ's name they were empowered to bring generosity and forgiveness
and new life to a world marked by greed, violence, and death.

That story wasn't just about what happened to disciples long ago.
That story is about what God in Christ can do among us here and now.

I've seen it happen.

I've seen people filled with anxiety be filled with the peace of Christ.

I've seen people filled with anger and resentment know the release that comes from forgiving and being forgiven.

I've seen those who were riddled with doubt come to new faith.

Jesus once said that the kingdom of God is like a very small seed, a mustard seed.

Even the smallest step of faith, in God's care can grow into a flowering bush that will provide shade and nurture for God's creatures.

Sometimes our doubts take over because we (as the saying goes) "let the perfect be the enemy of the good".

You will not find perfection in the church.
But, you can find Jesus.

Sadly, like Thomas we are often filled with doubt.
And like those first disciples we keep the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Muslims, Mexicans, conservatives, liberals you name it...

But, we cannot let doubt and fear stop us from seeking the risen Lord.

Jesus told us that he would not leave us like orphans. He would not abandon us.

Instead he would send his Spirit.

GOD'S AMPLIFIER

I like to think of the Spirit as God's amplifier.
Let me explain what I mean.

Since I was a kid I liked to play the guitar.
And one of my first guitars was a beautiful Les Paul model.

I had no business having such a beautiful guitar.
I wasn't a very good player.

But, I lucked out.

Somebody who didn't know what they had sold it to the local music store.

I told my parents, and they bought it for me for Christmas. (I saw Keith Richards playing that same guitar once at a Rolling Stones concert.)

And late at night I would often strum on that unamplified guitar and dream about being on the cover of the Rolling Stone.

The guitar was good,
but my amplifier... not so good.

Most of the time I didn't even plug the guitar in.

But, I worked for months cutting grass, and I finally got a decent amp.

And oh what a difference it made!

It took those almost silent riffs and made them audible for the whole neighborhood!

I loved it.

The neighbors...

In a much, much, MUCH greater way,
this is how the Spirit works in the life of the community of faith.

The Spirit of God in Christ keeps coming back to us.

We are afraid.

We are filled with doubt.

But, the Spirit takes our little riffs of faith and amplifies them into a soaring melody.

So, if you struggle being as generous as you know you should be,

if you have trouble forgiving someone,

if you keep life locked up tight out of fear,

if you're filled with doubt,

Take heart.

The Spirit of God can amplify the smallest riff of faith. God's Spirit can and will transform our life together.

God's Spirit can take two cents a meal and feed the hungry.

God's Spirit can take a half hearted mumbled confession, and turn it into a relationship restored.

God's Spirit can take one small risk and turn it into life changing opportunity.

You see, Thomas' story is our story.

All of us are somewhere between faith and doubt.

We still wonder if it's too good to be true.

We need to see more.

We need to touch and feel.

We need a faith that has some flesh and blood reality.

We waffle between forgiveness and resentment, confession and covering up our sin.

We are somewhere in between sharing and hoarding what we have.

That's okay.

The Spirit of the living Christ walks into those in between spaces.

We may padlock the doors, but locked doors are no match for the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of God in Christ is going to turn up the volume of grace in our lives.

The Spirit of God in Christ will not leave us alone in our doubt.

And that's the good news of Easter,
believe it or not.

Amen.