

Sermon for Easter 2, April 7, 2024

Every year we read the story of “Doubting Thomas” on the second Sunday of Easter. I like Doubting Thomas. I like that his story is recorded. It legitimizes our doubt. I know some Christians say that doubt is a sin, but apparently, the Bible doesn’t agree! Actually, they all doubted. My own theory is that if God had delayed another day in raising Jesus, they’d all have been off home. They weren’t going to go anywhere on Good Friday, of course, and Saturday was the Sabbath and you weren’t allowed to travel. So dawn on Sunday was about as early as they could take off. And that’s when he rose. We know from Luke that Cleopas and his companion (probably his wife Mary), were already on their way home when he appeared to them.

So at dawn, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and she and the other women ran and told the disciples. Who thought their words “an idle tale.” They didn’t believe either before they saw him. None of them did. But he appears to them the first day of the week in the evening, and they all believe. Except Thomas, who isn’t there at that time. When he gets in, they tell him and he still doesn’t believe. Until he sees Jesus himself the next week. Then he does believe and he understands theologically what has happened, better than the others. He says, “My Lord and my God!”

Doubt is a normal part of faith, actually. We all have doubts from time to time. Doubts about specific beliefs, doubts about each other, even doubts about God sometimes. That’s OK. I’m not talking about a settled pessimism, that assumes everything will always go wrong, everything will always turn out badly, anyone who thinks things might be good is an airdreamer, anyone who has hope is deluded. That’s not doubt. That’s determined pessimism. I don’t know if that’s a sin either, but it’s a bit like depression, very hard to live with and hard to be with for other people. It’s like they’re determined never to see any good, always to see bad, even if they have to imagine it. That’s determined pessimism.

Doubt is different. Doubt is when you kind of want to believe but you just can’t. When you have too many questions. When you’re discouraged by too many problems. When too many bad things have happened to you and you find it hard to believe anyone really cares. Or that God could be with us in all that. Those doubts are normal. I actually believe that it is our doubts that lead us to growth in faith. Because when we doubt, we need to dig deeper to find answers. We don’t bother to do that when everything is going fine and we are happy in our relationships.

So how do we deal with doubt? Because it’s pretty painful. And sometimes we feel ashamed of it. I know sometimes it’s hard to voice my doubts. People might think I’m a bad Christian. Sometimes they say so, as if anything bad that’s happened to me is my fault because I doubted. When I was in first year college, my philosophy teacher, who was also a Christian, used to ask us all sorts of questions to get us thinking. Questions about our faith. Questions about how that is lived out. Questions about how and why God acts in the world. The kids who’d been brought up not to doubt, not even to ask questions, didn’t like her courses. But I did. She always said, “The truth can bear examination.” It is only lies that can’t.

So if our faith is true, we can look at it all we like and it will stand up to that. We can ask questions, and it will stand up to that. And if part of it seems not to be able to stand up, maybe we need to rethink that bit. I don't mean it has to stand up to someone who is determined not to believe. I know people like that. But someone with an open mind, with curiosity, who really wants to come to the truth, yes, our faith can stand up to that kind of investigation. And when we do investigate it with an open mind, we come to deeper truths, deeper understanding, as Thomas did.

Let's look at this story more carefully. Thomas lacks faith at first, because he is not with the others when Jesus comes to them. We don't know why. Maybe he was out buying groceries. But he's not there so he doesn't share in the group experience of meeting Jesus and he doesn't believe. And he says so. And you know what? Everyone's OK with that. No one says he has to leave. He is still part of the community. And it is because he's still part of the community that he is there the next time Jesus comes. And so very often, Jesus does come to us in community. I know for myself, some of my most intense encounters with God happen within our worship. That's when I'm most keenly aware of God's presence. When I gather with other Christians to worship and share God's love.

Our other readings talk about the importance of community. The early church not only met for worship but they shared everything they had with each other. John speaks of how we find love and forgiveness within the community. The psalmist says, "How good it is when kindred live together in unity. It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard of Aaron." Now that sounds kind of icky to us, but that was the anointing oil, the oil that set Aaron apart as holy, that gave him the Spirit. It is when we, the kindred of the church, dwell together in unity that the anointing of the Holy Spirit comes upon us, abundantly.

And it is good for us, when we meet together, to think about our faith and ask questions of it. If we are experiencing doubt, bring it to the church, to the community of faith. And if someone does bring their doubts, we should look at them with an open mind, and not judgmentally. Say, "Let's look at that. How do we understand that? How can that make any sense?" Or, "I've struggled with that, too. Here's what helped me." Again, people have to have an open mind, a spirit of curiosity, a willingness to learn, even maybe to change our opinions. And in the community of faith, with the anointing of the Spirit, we can come to answers that help us live faithfully in this puzzling, discouraging world of ours. And that's when we will have deeper insights, like Thomas who realised the implications of the resurrection before the others because he had been living with doubt. Or perhaps he doubted because he'd already considered the implications.

Most of you are aware that I wasn't brought up in the church. I joined when I was 15 and I had a conversion experience, in church, and decided to follow Jesus at that point. And the church I was part of was influenced by the prosperity gospel teaching. The basis of that is that God is the King of the Universe, we are adopted children of God, so we are the King's Kids and we should expect to live like King's Kids. And if we believe and behave properly, and ask, everything will go well for us. We will be living in clover. Well, naturally, I was attracted to this. Who doesn't want everything to be good for them? And if stuff went badly,

they said, you must have sinned and all you had to do was clean up your act and it would be good again. Today I would see this as blaming the victim, but I didn't think of that then.

I went off to a Christian college where these ideas were reinforced, to some degree, at least by most of the students. And it was all great. Until March of my first year when my brother died. Actually, a couple of the students in the aviation program, good people, also crashed and died. So how to understand this horrible disaster? Because according to the beliefs some of the people had taught me, this shouldn't happen. Or if it did, it was somehow punishment. Only it had happened, and I found I couldn't believe that God would kill all these people just because some of us had been bad. And anyway, we really hadn't been all that bad. So my faith was really shaken.

And you know what saved me? Saved my faith? The Christian community. I stayed in the Christian community and I spent hours talking to people. My peers and friends would spend hours having coffee with me or going for a walk around the lake, and talking about all this stuff. My philosophy prof and others spent hours with me exploring these questions, these doubts: why do good people suffer anyway? How can we make sense of the bad stuff that happens if God loves us? Hard questions.

And in the course of all that, I came to some answers, kind of. A lot of it involves our freedom to do bad stuff. God allows us freedom. And that meant that God didn't actually control everything quite the way I'd been led to believe. And I also came to realise that Jesus suffered, the apostles suffered, the saints suffered, bad stuff happened to them. So I had to reject the idea that if you followed Jesus, nothing bad would happen to you. And I had to find a deeper basis for my faith, a deeper reason for following Jesus. My friends and mentors helped me with this, and deepened their own faith in the process. I described it later as if I'd been walking along and the floor had disappeared from under me. And then I'd fallen down a bit and discovered the rock foundation under that floor.

I came to realise that God's love for us isn't expressed in shielding us from all evil and showering presents on us. Rather, God's love for us is expressed by being with us through thick and thin. And often, being with us through other members of the church. If I had left the church in disgust, or been thrown out for lack of faith, none of that would have happened. It was in the context of the Christian community that I was able to wrestle with my doubts and my faith grew and deepened and changed. The details changed. The foundation was still in Christ.

Don't be afraid of doubts that arise. Don't hide them for shame. Everyone is welcome in this church, whatever their faith, whatever their doubt. Together we can walk through all these struggles, which every human being has, and find our Lord Jesus is with us, walking with us the whole way, as he does in the Resurrection stories. And we'll find that together our faith is strong enough to deal with any questions, any doubts. Our collective faith, in the church, burns within us, even through our doubt, sometimes the brighter because of our doubt. So don't be afraid. There is room for all of us, just as we are, within the Christian community. And here Jesus meets us and loves us, always. That's why I like the story of Doubting Thomas. It shows us how to deal with our doubts in a helpful, supportive, loving

way, and how to work through them and find the gift of deeper faith we are offered. May this church always have the courage of Thomas and the love of the community to tackle our doubts and share our faith, and trust Jesus to be with us in that.