



Sermon

April 11, 2010
Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Faith in Doubting Thomas

Here's why I dislike Children's Sermons.

One Sunday, a pastor I know launched into one. The usual group of cherubs was joined by a visitor, an 8 yr. old friend of a regular attendee. Not only was the visitor new to this particular church, but came from a church where they didn't do children's sermons.

The visiting child followed the other children forward to sit at the feet of the pastor positioned at the break in the chancel rail. The children sat quietly, attentively waiting for the pastor to begin. The pastor, experienced working with children, tried to get the cherubs interested in the message by asking a question: "What is fuzzy and has a long tail?" Silence. Deadpan. No response.

The pastor continued to probe: "C'mon now children, what has big teeth and climbs trees?" Still no response. Maybe the kids were up past their bedtime. The pastor probed further: "Oh, children, you know this. What jumps around a lot, gathers nuts and hides them?" The visiting little girl, unable to bear the lack of responsiveness any longer or contain herself, blurted out: "Look Pastor, it's church. I know the answer is *supposed* to be Jesus, but it sure sounds a lot like a squirrel to me."

Like I said about Children's sermons... I'd have a mind to brain the precocious little punk. Except she's right, in terms of wanting to give the right as far as giving the right answer is concerned. At the foot of the pastor, in the circle of your family, friends, boss, teacher, supervisor, YOU want to give the right answer. I want to give the right answer. Who doesn't? We want to keep the

authorities happy. We don't want to be on the outside looking in. We don't want uncertainty, doubt or reluctance believing the party line – believing something or anything – to be interpreted as lack of faith or weakness.

We all have our doubts about many things. Better we keep them to ourselves. That is the safest way.

So although I'd love to have a little talk with the little miss smarty pants, the talk, upon further reflection, wouldn't be scolding for showing-up the pastor. The talk would be appreciative for acknowledging the accepted norm, then confessing how much she had some trouble with it.

For all the clichés about Jesus' famous or infamous disciple "doubting Thomas," see him today in the same light as the little girl who spoke up at the children's sermon. Thomas had NOT seen the risen Jesus when he first appeared to the others. Oh, the others told him they had seen the Lord after his crucifixion, witnessed his being placed in the tomb, then arriving to find the same tomb empty and the stone rolled away. But Thomas was skeptical. He doubted. He had misgivings.

Still, Thomas wanted to fit in. He might have said, "Look, friends, I know what the answer is supposed to be. I know the answer is *supposed* to acknowledge seeing Jesus in the flesh, but I have to tell you, it sure sounds like you saw a ghost to me."

Jesus wasn't a ghost, of course. He was really alive, as Thomas found out when he had the

chance to see and touch for himself. Still, Thomas' questioning must have been as difficult for him as it was for that little girl trying to understand what the pastor was up to with all the squirrely clues. It is just as difficult, maybe more so, when we struggle with matters that seem clear to others but are blurry to downright unbelievable for us. Or vary from well established, accepted norms.

What if the story of Thomas' is about his honesty and forthrightness expressed in the upper room just after the first Easter? What if Thomas' unpopular honesty and forthrightness might give hope and empower us *in* our doubts instead of scolding and squashing them?

In this light, so-called "Doubting" Thomas is a misnomer if there ever was one. Honest Thomas, Fortright Thomas is like it. Here's is one of the faithful who doesn't mindlessly accept whatever is widely held or expected as *THE* answer or viewpoint. Here, in the company of others, in the inner circle of the friends of Jesus, it is OK to be bewildered, afraid, have doubts or not have all the answers (even though you say you do, or think you should because you don't want to stir up any trouble). Among Jesus' inner circle of friends it is all right if you have questions.

Another story. A family is riding home from church. Dad quizzes son about Sunday School that day. "Moses," replies the boy, "about the Exodus and how Moses freed God's people from the Egyptians."

"Great," says Dad. "Tell me more."

"It was cool," said the boy. "Moses crept behind enemy lines and sneaked his people under the barbed wire and past the search lights, out into the desert. They got stuck at the Red Sea and it looked like they were gonna get captured because the Egyptians were coming with tanks. So Moses ordered the engineering corps to build a pontoon bridge across the sea and when the Egyptian tanks started after them, Moses called in an air strike and jet fighters flew down with smart bombs and only killed the bad guys!"

"Is that *really* what your teacher told you?" asks the father.

"No," says" the boy. "But you'd never believe what the teacher said."

I don't know about you, but it feel sometimes like my life has more troubling questions than absolute answers. I have questions about how and why the good die young while people with dementia, who've lost most of their human dignity, can't get home to be with the Lord? Questions about crooks, cheats, and ne-er-do wells getting all the breaks while good, solid, hard working people are out of work. Questions about how and why wars and rumors of wars, poverty amidst plenty, capital punishment (killing people to get people to stop killing people) hold sway. Questions about divisive, nasty, political rhetoric and choosing up sides – even in the church – makes for pitched battles, threatened schisms, insiders and outsiders. All these questions and so many more in our lives and times leave many in doubt about just where God stands. Not to mention how expected, accepted answers to such questions are so difficult to believe.

Ah, right after Easter, Thomas Sunday says doubt and fear are bound to come upon us. And when they do, we'll fare better facing them than burying them deeper, turning them inward – with all the anxiety, anger, exhaustion, feeling hopeless and guilt we're liable to be carrying.

In both the stories about the children and their questioning, the children were in safe places to question and then to see and learn. Likewise the disciples, Jesus' friends were in the Upper Room, same place as the last supper. Likewise we are here because the church (I hope and pray), this our faith community (I hope and pray) is a safe place where we can encounter the risen Christ by living our questions, living through our questions patiently loved and led us into deeper truth, just as the risen Jesus did with Thomas.

In such safe places Jesus surprisingly breaks through, unexpectedly busts the bars and locks like that day with Thomas and so much as says: "It's gonna be all right. Peace. Look at me. Look to wounds and scars and suffering love that holds on, that has abided the worst. Forgive yourselves. Forgive others."

The prayer for St. Thomas' feast day (December 21), the church's prayer in and for his memory says:

Christ our light
Like Thomas we need to see,
We need to touch
We need to be sure before we believe.
When we don't know, help us to trust;
When we can't see, help us to keep on walking.
– *The New Zealand Prayer Book*

If we are willing to walk through, work through our doubts and disbelieving, we will find the other side of today's gospel and what it teaches about faith. Honest in our relationships with God and one another, there is the support that brings us to believe what we cannot easily see because we have touched and been touched by love which has endured the worst that could be done. Love still standing right in front of us doubts, questions and all.

Our life with God and one another brings us to recognize the Spirit working among us providing new possibilities moving us beyond doubt and fear, anxiety and emotional paralysis. A love and it's spirit that won't go away. What we doubt as possible can come to reality. Dreams can be fulfilled, forgiveness can be offered, obstacles overcome, pain relieved, sickness healed, hunger fed, longings relieved, good bought from evil, life growing out of death.

"I have so many questions," this person said to me with sadness, wondering whether she could come back, or would be welcomed back to the church. "I have so many doubts about God, the Bible and Jesus and what they have to do with how I live my life," she said sounding what she really believed was that doubts and questions are disqualifiers. "But here in this church I feel safe asking. I haven't always felt that way."

If Easter means anything it means moving from doubt to faith, from fear to joy, from death to life. The passage from the way of death God brought down to the way of life God raised up is the very passage Thomas made through honest doubts. It is our passage to as we standing Thomas in front

of the risen Christ, saying, "My Lord and My God!"

So, how's this for a confession of faith to rival all others. Not, "God said it. I believe it. Case closed." But "I believe. Help my unbelief."

Someone has said: "Doubts are ants in the pants of faith. Doubts keep faith awake and alive." Like the little girl at the Children's Sermon or the little boy talking Sunday School with dad, like all of us struggling to make sense of what God is up to in our living and dying, this is one time when it's okay to have ants in your pants!

■■■ Amen ■■■