

“Room for Doubt” – April 12, 2015

John 20:19-31

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This coming week we're faced with one of the most hated days on the calendar. Tax day. As much as we dislike it, we know taxes are a necessary evil. There's a saying that most of us have probably heard a few times in our lives, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, but death and taxes." (often attributed to Benjamin Franklin) Taxes have been around for a really long time. Even Jesus had some things to say about taxes – give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Give to God what belongs to God. (Luke 20:20-26)

So our first century friends would have understood our reservations about April 15th. They didn't like taxes any more than we do. And they also would have understood the sentiment behind the phrase, "nothing is certain but death and taxes." Both are inevitable. Then along came Easter Sunday, and suddenly the certainty of death got a little vague.

Like us, they had understood death in all its finality. When Jesus died on the cross on Friday afternoon, their hopes were dashed. It was over. Dead men don't lead revolutions. In their minds it was all done. Jesus was gone. Even the empty tomb didn't change their minds. Remember the message from last week, the women had gone to the tomb and were astonished and afraid. Despite what Jesus may have told them earlier, preparing them for the resurrection, imbedded in their minds was the fact that dead men don't rise again.

In John's gospel we learn a little bit more about what happened on that very first Easter Sunday, after the initial sight of the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene had gone back to the tomb, and stood outside of it. She was weeping, because she thought someone had taken Jesus' body. But then Jesus came to her. At first she didn't recognize him, but then when he spoke her name, she knew it was him. This was the first sighting of the resurrected Jesus. No longer was the tomb simply empty, now she knew why it was empty, she had visual and auditory proof that Jesus really was resurrected. She ran back again to tell the other disciples. But they didn't appear to be too impressed.

Later that evening of that first Easter is where our passage for today begins. The disciples were fearfully huddled together in a room. The door was locked and they were afraid of the authorities coming to arrest them. But besides being afraid, they were also doubtful. The empty tomb left them with questions of course, even Peter had run out that morning to see for himself. Yep, indeed it was empty. Of course, the most logical explanation was that someone had stolen Jesus' body. Even when Mary came back the second time, with that astonishing tale of having seen Jesus in the flesh, they weren't willing to accept her words at face value. You see, they were still full of doubts.

They were down to earth, pragmatic folks. Often they had been astonished at the miraculous things that Jesus could do. And it took a while for those things to sink in. But Jesus was gone

now. They needed to face the facts, and in time, they'd move on to other things. Maybe get back to their prior lives, lives before Jesus. And what about what Mary saw? Well, she was overwrought. Who wouldn't be? She probably just got caught up in her grief. She had a vision of what she wanted to see. Nothing more. Just a daydream. None of the disciples had been sleeping very well lately. Maybe she just fell asleep while sitting in the garden near the tomb and saw Jesus in a beautiful dream. It's understandable.

But then suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst. And the very first thing he said to them was "shalom," peace be with you. He said this, probably to quell their fears. Then he showed them his hands and the place where his side had been pierced by the spear. After seeing those specific wounds, the disciples understood who he was. And they were filled with joy. Apparently death wasn't as certain as they thought it was.

Jesus then gave them their commission. Just as he had been sent by the Father into this world, he was sending them out into the world to do his work. And at that moment, by breathing on them, he gave them the power of the Holy Spirit to complete this mission. This is John's version of the Pentecost story. But one disciple was missing. Thomas was not there.

After Jesus left them, Thomas came back in. His friends began to tell him the wonderful news about Jesus. But it was just too much. Thomas held firmly to his doubts. I can hear them saying, "But Thomas, you gotta believe us, he even showed us his hands, where the nails were. And his side, where it was pierced as he hung on the cross. He really was here! Why don't you believe us?"

Perhaps Thomas was a realist, not easily swayed by public opinion or mass hysteria. He wanted empirical proof not eyewitness accounts. He wanted to see with his own eyes the wounds on Jesus' body, hear with his own ears the words from Jesus' mouth, and touch with his own two hands the skin that was pierced by nail and sword. Was he being unreasonable?

Was he? Some people are pretty quick to negatively judge Thomas. He has gone through church history with the designation, Doubting Thomas. But didn't the other disciples also doubt Mary's story? Is it really so surprising that Thomas responded in this way? Do we not have our own doubts about what happened? Do we not have our own doubts when it comes to matters of faith?

In our journey as Christians, we come to realize that faith is not an all or nothing kind of deal. We each come to faith in different ways, but for all of us, at some point or another, doubt is still part of the equation. There are those people who had major conversion experiences at some point in their lives. They can tell you the year, day, hour, even minute of when they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The Apostle Paul had that kind of experience out on the Damascus Road. Usually these type of experiences result in a major turning point in their lives.

Others of us have a more subtle arrival at faith. Perhaps it begins in infancy or early childhood, when through our baptism we are claimed by God. Then there are years of Sunday School and listening to Bible stories and growing up around faithful Christians who show us love and nurture our budding faith. And then over the years, we experience questions and doubts, good times and bad. Maybe we even leave the church for a time before coming back. We have periods of time when we can really feel God's presence in our lives, and other times where God seems quite distant. This experience of coming to faith is subtle and occurs over time. And times of doubt are not uncommon.

But even those who have had the earth shattering, life changing experience can also face periods of doubt and questioning in their lives. For some this can be a real crisis of faith for them. We lose faith, we gain faith. We have questions, our questions are answered. Or sometimes, our questions aren't answered, but we learn to live with the ambiguity. In all our varied and unique cases, Jesus appears to us in the way that we need him most.

The different resurrection appearances in all the gospels show these different ways that Jesus comes to us. In order to believe, Mary needed to hear him call her by name there in the garden by the tomb, the beloved disciple only needed to see the empty tomb and the discarded grave clothes, and he believed. The other disciples needed the appearance in the room. The two disciples on the Emmaus Road needed to see him breaking the loaf of bread, and then their eyes were opened. The Apostle Paul needed the flashy encounter on the Road to Damascus. And Thomas, well Thomas needed to see for himself.

A week passed, and the disciples were all in the room together again. This time Thomas was with them. Again I have a few questions about this. I wonder, why are the disciples still hanging out in this room. Why weren't they out building churches and feeding the hungry and witnessing to their neighbors? They're still sitting in that darned room, not doing much of anything. I want to yell at them to get out and do something!!

Could it be that they were still learning, still growing in their own faith, still dealing with some residual doubts? They'd seen Jesus with their own eyes, but was there still room for a little doubt, a little uncertainty about what was coming next? After all, Thomas had to listen to their stories all week, and he still wasn't convinced.

Then, again, Jesus showed up. The doors were still shut, but in he came. He went right up to Thomas, and said, "Here you go, Thomas. These are my hands, this is my side, go ahead and touch them. Experience it for yourself." I wish that the gospel writer gave us a clue about how Jesus spoke these words, especially when Jesus said, "Do not doubt but believe." Was he stern with Thomas, as in a rebuke. Was he sad and disappointed by the lack of faith for one who had been with him for the past three years. Some could argue for either of these positions. But I like to think that Jesus was grinning when he said it. Smiling as he reached out his nail-scarred hands to a very shocked Thomas.

I think he spoke as one who loved humanity and understood the frailties of human faith. He came and spoke as one who knows exactly how to respond to the uniqueness of each and every one of us. He approached Thomas in a way that Thomas needed to be approached. And because of this, Thomas was able to cry out, the most intense confession of faith recorded in the gospels, "My Lord and my God." Jesus was not angry with Thomas for being doubtful. Doubt is not necessarily a bad thing. One preacher stated, "Doubt is faith seeking to grow! Doubt is faith seeking understanding. You see, doubt is not a sign of a lack of faith. To the contrary, it is evidence of how seriously you take your faith - so seriously that you are willing to ask questions, to raise doubts and follow them up! Seek to answer and resolve them. Faith will use doubt to nourish and strengthen itself." (quote from Bass Mitchel)

The next lines of this chapter of John's gospel are written for us. Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe. While we may not have seen the resurrected Jesus in the flesh as those early witnesses, we can experience the Risen Christ in our lives. He comes to us in a variety of ways. We see him in the church, as he works his mission through the members of his body. We see him in the world when love and goodness and kindness triumph over the powers of evil. We see him in the small miracles that take place every day. We experience him in the pages of scripture as we study and learn the stories and teachings of the Bible. We experience him when we show love to our neighbors, forgive those who have wronged us, and seek reconciliation with those we have wronged. We see the Risen Christ when we perform acts of service, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, and seeking justice for those who are oppressed.

Christ is very much alive and with us. We can experience his presence in our lives in so many ways. However questions do come up and there are times when our faith seems to be on shaky ground. It is heartening for me to see the skepticism of these early disciples. If it was hard for them to believe, then my own doubts don't appear to be so scandalous. Our life of faith is not static; it is constantly changing and growing and developing. We should not be afraid of having questions. The questions we have, the uncertainties we wrestle with, help us to mature on our faith journeys. In our lives of faith, there is room for a little doubt. We can use that doubt to help us grow into an even stronger faith.