

## FAITHFUL DOUBT

John 20:19-31

We just celebrated Easter with a great spirit. We have gone through the Lenten season, Passion Week and the cross and now it is time to celebrate. We are still in the Easter season because in the Christian year we celebrate Easter for 7 weeks until Pentecost. Yet, our scripture story for today tells us about an important part of our journey of Easter faith: Doubt. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, does not believe the other disciples that they saw Jesus. After the other disciples tell Thomas about the appearance of Jesus to them, he says, "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 experienced God and had known Jesus personally, but then he asked for a physical sign of faith. Is this kind of questioning OK with God? Is it OK in church? I don't know about you, but I grew up hearing at church that it was not OK to have doubts or to ask questions. In fact, when I started having doubts about God, like most teenagers do, I felt like I had to leave the church.

I have read this story about Thomas many times and thought that there was something wrong with him. I was secretly upset with God for entertaining his questions and doubts. Thomas was one of the twelve disciples who lived with Jesus for three years. I have often thought to myself if I was with the disciples and saw Jesus physically, I would never have any doubt. Seeing Jesus physically seems like the ultimate seal of faith. So what is the story here? Why do such faithful people doubt God?

Fortunately the story of Thomas doesn't end with the questions and doubts that he raised. God does respond to his questions and doubts. In fact, out of his questions, God finds great opportunities to nurture his faith and equip him for the journey ahead. The questions and doubts that Thomas raised became tools for teaching him about a deeper trust in God that led him to do great deeds of faith. Thomas helped spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to a multitude of people. The members of the Syrian Orthodox Church in India tell that it was Thomas who brought the good news to India. I believe that the story of Thomas is a great example of how our faith is formed. We learn about and experience God, yet many of us go through times of doubt and questioning. I dare say that we need these questions and doubts because they help us let go of the familiar things of faith that have become too familiar and lost their meaning. Through questions we can let go of what we know, of our own hold on the truth, of our egos! Questions of doubt help us move beyond where we are to be open to new mysteries and revelations from God. Our questions help lead us from believing what others say about God to having our own firsthand knowledge of God. So it is a movement often from knowing God in our intellect to knowing God in the depth of our being. Doubt and questions are our doorway to true experiences of faith.

This is hard because faith and doubt are often presented as opposites. As good church people, we are taught to believe and trust, not to doubt. Doubt is uncomfortable! We can't control it. It makes us vulnerable before God. It makes us even admit our weaknesses. We put a great deal of emphasis in our culture and in the Christian tradition on knowing facts and getting the right information. But the story of Thomas shows us a different way of faith and of knowing. Faith is not about the facts or about stuffing our heads with information. Faith is about learning how to experience God in our own lives because as Helen Keller said, "The best and most beautiful things cannot be seen or touched, they must be felt with the heart." This is one of the hardest lessons of faith. But once we learn how to trust our own experience of God, God can do amazing things through us. A similar thing happened to the Rev. Carlton Pearson of Higher Dimensions Church, which was once one of the biggest churches in Oklahoma, drawing crowds of over 5,000 people every Sunday. Rev. Pearson was a well-known Pentecostal Evangelical preacher. Pastor Pearson had a personal relationship with Oral Roberts and had appearances on TV and at the White House. He traveled the world preaching his message. But several years ago, scandal engulfed the Reverend. He didn't have an affair. He didn't embezzle lots of money. His sin was something that to a lot of people is far worse ... he started having doubts about hell. He started asking questions of deep faith: How can the God who loves the world so much be so judgmental? Why can't God reach those who don't believe in Christ? After personal struggle and prayer, the Rev. Carlton Pearson stopped believing in hell. He received a personal revelation and an experience of God that led him to preach the unconditional grace of the gospel. Once Carlton Pearson started preaching this new revelation, his church fell apart. After all, when there's no hell (as the logic goes), you don't really need to believe in Jesus to be saved from it. What followed were the swift departures of his pastors, and an exodus from his congregation

– which quickly dwindled to a few hundred people. Donations dropped off, too. Reverend Pearson's life's work was put on the line. But just as things got to the worst point, new kinds of people, curious people, started showing up on Sunday mornings. Today Carlton Pearson is still the pastor of Higher Dimensions Church and is in the middle of writing a book about his own experiences of God. God's amazing grace touched Carlton's heart and moved him from preaching hell to preaching the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that hell is anywhere you are when you are separated from God. And all of this started with Rev. Pearson's willingness to ask questions and to share his doubts with God.

*Centuries ago*, Copernicus doubted that the earth was the center of the universe and Christians around him were using the Bible and quoting the Bible to prove that the earth was the center of the universe. His doubt of their reading of the Bible led him to a larger and deeper understanding of the Christian faith. *Centuries ago*, during the time of Columbus, certain Christians were using the Bible and quoting the Bible that the earth was flat and had edges and if you sailed too far, your boat would fall over the edge of the earth. Columbus doubted the Christianity he had been taught, and his doubts led to a deeper and larger faith. *Centuries ago*, many Christians believed that slavery was OK because they found verses in the Bible that mentioned it. But we are thankful for those Christians who doubted and asked God for guidance to learn new ways of love. *Centuries ago*, many Christians believed that the rightful place for a woman was in the home where she can be submissive to her husband. We are thankful today for those men and women who doubted and who asked God for guidance in studying those scriptures that were used against women.

A couple of years ago, it came out to the public that Mother Teresa had written several letters to her superiors over the course of 66 years about her doubts. Many people were appalled that such a wonderful saint of the church would have such questions. But when I heard about this, I felt that this was a confirmation that Mother Teresa was truly a saint, a person who had such a close relationship with God that she was able to share her struggles and doubts with God.

Last week during a conversation I learned from one of our church members here about her experience with questions. After going to college, she came back and shared with her pastor all of the faith questions she was struggling with, his answer was, "I don't worry about people who ask questions about faith. I worry about those who don't ask questions."

Having said all of this about doubt and questions, we need to pay attention to the relationships surrounding the doubts and questions of Thomas. First: Relationships with others. The questions and doubts of Thomas didn't take him out of his community of faith. He dealt with these questions in community. Thomas didn't walk out on the disciples when they told him about the appearance of Jesus. Second: Relationship with God. Thomas had a close personal relationship with Jesus and was able to talk to him directly about his fears and doubts. So, in order for us today to move into a deeper relationship with God that is a life changing, transforming experience of faith, we need to do at least two things: 1. Be in community where our questions and doubts can be explored. 2. Allow our questions and doubts to be explored in the context of our relationship with God through prayer.

I invite you today to ask your questions of faith. Life is full of pain, injustice and violence. These things often drive us to doubt the goodness of God's creation. What are the questions that are on your hearts? Are they questions about a loss that you are experiencing? Are they doubts about the meaning of life? Whatever your questions may be, I challenge you to open the door for God to move from being an acquaintance to become your closest friend, a friend you can share your deepest fears and doubts with. I invite you to ask those questions that are on your heart so that God can transform your faith and allow you to give all that you have and are in service. There is a Faith in Action piece in your bulletin that I recommend to you, and I want to make sure that you know that I would be more than happy to meet with and share this journey with you. And as you do this, may you know that on this journey, there are no wrong turns, only wrong attitudes. And as you ask your questions of faith, I want to encourage you through the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves. Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the question now. Perhaps you will...gradually without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers." As you journey with God with your faith and your doubts, may you be assured of God's unconditional love in Christ Jesus. Amen.