

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

April 19, 2020- The 2nd Sunday of Easter

Psalm 16:1-11, John 20:19-31

THE COURAGE TO DOUBT

*“Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God,
if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.*

Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.

They keep it awake and moving.”

— Frederick Buechner,

There are some who say that Doubting Thomas deserves the nickname he got nearly 2,000 years ago.

There are some who say we should look at what Thomas did and try as hard as we can to never be like him.

There are some who say that Thomas sinned by questioning Jesus’ resurrection.

There are some who say that doubt is a sign that you have no faith.

There are some who say that when we doubt, we break God’s heart.

But I want to say to all them that they are so very wrong.

Doubt is a sign of faith.

It takes courage to doubt.

And Thomas is our teacher.

Imagine for a moment that you were Thomas on that night in the locked room, a week after Jesus had died on the cross.

If you hadn’t seen the risen Jesus for yourself,

no matter how excited and convinced the other 10 disciples, and the women were,
can’t you imagine that you too might have questioned them?

Only a week before you had watched Jesus arrested, condemned, beaten, and crucified.

With the other disciples you had run away in fear.

Then together you had hidden behind locked doors fearful of the ones who had killed Jesus,

grieving the greatest loss of your life, the teacher and healer you thought was the
promised Messiah of God.

And when you came back to the room you were told that they had seen Jesus, while you were
away,

but then a week went by and nothing happened.

Jesus didn’t appear again.

The stories seemed like just stories, not the truth.

Not a truth you could believe in.

cf: *Pray as You Go App*, 7/8 April, John 20:19-31, <https://www.pray-as-you-go.org/home/>

I hear Thomas’s words coming from the heart and head of a man in sorrow and despair over the loss of Jesus. Thomas wanted to know for himself.

Can we hear his words coming from all that he had lived through over the three years of Jesus’ ministry,

and the terror and horror of Jesus’ final week?

Can we hear his words from a man who had waited a week to see if the other disciples and the women were speaking the truth?

Thinking of what he'd lived through, listen to his words:

“Unless I see for myself the mark of the nails in hands,
and put my fingers into the marks from the nails,
unless I put my hand on his side, on the wound where the spear was put in his side,
I will not believe.”

What happens for us when we hear these as words of faith, and not doubt?

What happens for us, when we see courage in this story?

What happens in your life when Thomas becomes your teacher in how to live a faithful life?

Now listen to Jesus' response to Thomas when he came again to the room where the disciples were.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't condemn Thomas for his questions?

He didn't yell at him, Jesus didn't say “how could you, what were you thinking, where is your faith?”

Instead Jesus met Thomas with exactly the evidence he'd asked for:

Jesus said: “Peace be with you.” 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.”

cf: *Pray as You Go* App, 7/8 April, John 20:19-31, <https://www.pray-as-you-go.org/home/>

Jesus came to Thomas bringing peace.

Jesus came to Thomas with understanding and answers.

Jesus came to Thomas with love that had listened to his questions and responded.

That is why I entitled today's sermon “The Courage to Doubt.”

That is why I included the quote from Frederick Buechner at the beginning of the sermon:

Buechner wrote: “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.

Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.

They keep it awake and moving.”

Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 20.

Thomas had a living faith, a faith willing to ask questions, a faith willing to ask the really big questions like: did the resurrection happen? Is Jesus really alive?

Thomas took the risk of looking for Jesus.

The story of Thomas, and the nudge of Buechner's quote that if we don't have doubts we're either kidding ourselves or asleep, gives us permission to ask our own big questions of faith.

Thomas's courage invites us to not be afraid to ask the questions that get in our own way of believing.

It is normal for many people to question where God is, when they are in the midst of the most expansive world pandemic of our lifetime. As Covid19 cases rise here and around the world, as death tolls rise, as jobs are lost, as going to the grocery store in mask and gloves reminds you of how close illness and death might be, it is normal to ask “where is God?” It is normal. It is normal to question; it is normal to doubt. It is normal!

Thomas's story invites us to ask Jesus to show up. His story invites us to walk up and put our hands into our doubts, to touch them, to explore them, to ask the questions that others won't ask out loud, but we need to ask.

It's scary to let ourselves ask those questions. Especially when people in our lives we respect tell us that it's wrong to ask those questions, it's wrong to doubt, it's a sign our faith isn't strong enough. But I choose to disagree with them; I completely and thoroughly disagree with them.

Thomas's story tells us that ants in the pants of our faith are not a bad thing! Even scary big ants of doubt and fear in these days of Covid19 are not a bad thing. They are a very human way of responding, they are even a faithful way of responding to how our world has changed.

A faith that is alive and moving, and maybe even uncomfortable, is a good thing; it is a faith that is growing. Do I think God caused this pandemic to increase our faith? No, I do not. Do I think God can move and breath in the midst of the doubts and fears of these days and speak to our hearts? Yes, I do!

Plus, there is an amazing promise in this story of Thomas and his questions. I am convinced that just as Jesus came to Thomas, Jesus will come to us.

Jesus is present with us as we walk up to our doubts and fears and explore them.

When we name our doubts and fears, which I am convinced are really questions of faith, Jesus will come to us:

through the words of other Jesus-followers around us,
through times of prayer,
through answers we find in the Bible,
through words in a sermon, or a book we're reading, or a hymn or song we hear,
and through that deep inner knowing that is God-given.

Jesus will come to us, as he came to Thomas,

Bringing peace

Bringing understanding,

Bringing love that will listen to our questions,

And breathing God's Holy Spirit into our lives.

This is the promise of the resurrected Jesus, who came that we might have new life in him. We are Easter people, who may struggle with the empty cross and the empty tomb, or with all that is happening around us because of Covid19.

And we are Easter people who can trust that the one who hung on that cross,
the one who rose from that tomb,

is the one who waits for our questions, our doubts and our fears,

with peace, with the Holy Spirit, and with love this is for each of us.

Through that love of Christ, in our own timing, may we too be able to say with Thomas:

"My Lord and my God!"