

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
April 8, 2018, The 2nd Sunday of Easter
 Psalm 133, John 10:19-31

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 you may have read in your bulletins:

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.

Thomas's 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 have answered.

Thomas's story tells us that ants in the pants of our faith are not a bad thing!

A faith that is alive and moving, and maybe even uncomfortable is a good thing; it is a faith that is growing.

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 explore them.

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

through answers we find in the Bible,
 through the words of other Jesus-followers around us,
 through times of prayer,
 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 help us find the answers.

This is a 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 other big questions of faith.

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 and with loving answers that are for each of us.

So that in time we too can stand before Jesus and respond with Thomas:
 "My Lord and my God!"