

SCRIPTURE TEXT: John 20:19-31

SERMON TITLE: “Keeping Faith in our Doubts”

Well, last Sunday we said it rather emphatically: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!” Having had a week to think about it, are we sure or do we doubt? Well, this morning we discover that doubt is okay even when it comes to resurrection. The morning’s gospel story comes from the book of John, chapter 20, verses 19-31. Listen for the word of God.

SCRIPTURE LESSON.

So there we have it. Thomas, one of the original twelve disciples, doubted. He refused to believe. He had not experienced what the others had experienced. He wanted tangible proof of resurrection. He wanted to touch the wounds on the body of the risen Christ or he would not believe! He doubted!

Now according to the other gospels, Thomas wasn’t alone in his doubt. In Matthew’s gospel, when the eleven disciples see the resurrected Christ on a mountain in Galilee, Matthew says that “they worshipped him; but some doubted.”¹ In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus appears to his disciples and shows them his wounds, Luke says that “While in their joy, they were still disbelieving and still wondering.”² It sounds to me that there is room for doubt among those who follow Jesus.

And that’s a good thing, because I have my doubts—not only in this resurrection stuff—but I even sometimes find it hard to believe in God. Just look at the world around us. In the face of pain and suffering and evil, isn’t it hard to believe? When a loved one dies or someone close to me suffers, or my prayers go unanswered, I ask myself: “How can I continue to believe?”

Let me tell you a personal story. A number of years ago, I suffered from anxiety attacks that would hit me in the middle of the night. I would wake up with my heart racing and

¹ Matthew 28:17, NRSV.

² Luke 24:31, NRSV.

pounding. I'd be sweating. I felt this tremendous fear inside that I couldn't quite name.

The anxiety attacks lasted for awhile until finally, as I awoke one night in the grip of that same old fear, I could actually name the fear. It was doubt--intense, anxiety-ridden, fearful doubt. In that moment of awareness I knew that there was deep within me a fear that there was no God and that everything about my life in faith was a lie—including all of this business about resurrection!

Now fortunately, by simply naming the fear before God, and being gentle with myself, the fear subsided and the anxiety attacks stopped. But the doubt is still there. I wish it wasn't, but it is. I want some kind of clear sign to prove that things are as the gospels say. Which reminds me of something the comedian Woody Allen once said: "I'm plagued with doubts...if only God would give me some clear sign; like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank."³

Well, did you notice? Thomas received a sign. The risen Christ appeared to him and spoke to him: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." How did Thomas respond? He exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"

Now frankly, if I had had that kind of experience with the risen Christ, I would find it much easier to put my doubts aside and believe wholeheartedly—but I haven't had that experience. Have you? So what are we to do?

Well, I found some help with this question in an unusual place—the movie version of *The Sound of Music*. Early in the film, the Mother Abbess says to one of the sisters, "I always try to

³ Quoted in McKeithen, Jr., J. Harold. "Some Things Have To Be Believed To Be Seen." [Index Page The Sermon Mall](http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/00/0430001.html). 27 Apr. 2000. 05 May 2009 <<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/00/0430001.html>>.

keep faith in my doubts, Sister Berta.”⁴

Now that line caught my attention the very first time I heard it, and I’ve thought a lot about it since, and I’ve come to believe that it is possible to keep faith in our doubts.

In fact, I think that this phrase captures a biblical way of dealing with doubt. Think about it. When the Jews questioned God’s presence or God’s faithfulness, they weren’t giving up on their faith. In fact, they took all their questions and addressed them directly to God as an act of faith. They hurled their doubts to the heavens. The psalms of lament are filled with this kind of faith. Even Jesus, when he felt abandoned by God on the cross, uttered the opening line of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is what it means to keep faith in our doubts.

And to his credit, even Thomas managed to keep a measure of faith even in the midst of his doubts. Notice this: Eight days after his confession of disbelief in the risen Christ, where was Thomas? He was still with the disciples. His doubts had not driven him away from the community and the community had not driven him away because of his doubts. Thomas was still there--doubts and all--in the community--when Christ appeared again.

And that’s where we belong--in the church--with our doubts--so that we can learn together how to keep faith in our doubts.

Now I wish all of this was easier. I wish that I could say to you that I am absolutely, 100% certain of all this resurrection stuff—and even this God stuff—but I’m not! But I choose to believe anyway without absolute clarity.

Brennan Manning calls this kind of faith “ruthless trust.” Manning tells the story of John

⁴ The Sound of Music. Dir. Robert Wise. Perf. Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer. Film. 20th Century Fox, 1965.

Kavanaugh who went to work for three months at “the House of the Dying” in Calcutta, India. The first morning there, he met Mother Teresa. She asked him, “And what can I do for you?” Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she asked. He voiced a request that had long burdened him--a request that had motivated his journey to India. He said, “Pray that I have clarity.” To that simple but sincere request, Mother Teresa said firmly, “No, I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed, and then she said. “I have never had clarity, what I have always had is trust.”⁵ This sounds to me like keeping faith in our doubts.

And if we keep faith in doubts, a blessing will be ours. Do you remember what Jesus said to Thomas? “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Well, that’s me. And perhaps it’s you. I haven’t seen, and because I haven’t seen, I doubt—but I still believe—I choose to believe and to trust—and in this there’s a blessing—a blessing for those who keep faith in their doubts. I think a Presbyterian pastor puts his finger on this blessing when he writes: “Those who call their faith into question may be ahead of those who never doubt. Those who never doubt, never question, are stuck where they are. The ability to doubt and question is what leads to new breakthroughs in mind and spirit and indicates a willingness to grow intellectually and spiritually.” He then concludes that “It was through Thomas’ skepticism that he was led to a deeper faith and a new encounter with Christ.”⁶

Now does all of this sound pretty incredible? Well, of course it does. It’s an amazing

⁵ Dudley, June. "My Experiences." June Dudley. 05 May 2009 <<http://www.junedudley.net/leaveyfc.html>>.

⁶ Bowen, C. Edward. "Believe to See." Index Page The Sermon Mall. 27 Apr. 2000. 05 May 2009 <<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/00/apr00/043000d.html>>.

thing that we believe even though we have not seen. It is an amazing thing that we can keep faith even in our doubts. But we do. So on Easter Sunday morning we choose to join in the acclamation: "Christ is risen." Christ is risen, indeed! And we remember: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And now I give you the gift of silence to meditate upon the question: *How do we keep faith even in our doubts?*