

"Doubt as Virtue"

John 20:19-31

April 23, 2017

The Rev. David A. Van Dyke
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Second Sunday of Easter

I know I have said it before but I love this Sunday more than all other Sundays. Yes, Reformation Sunday is glorious. Yes, the four Sundays in Advent are powerful. Yes, Easter, with all of its fanfare is inspiring. But I find this first Sunday after Easter to be the most meaningful because it meets us where we are. It addresses us in the place where we reside most of the time, namely living between the hope and promises of Easter, and yet the world as we know it. The world as we experience it. Life, as we often endure it.

Most of our days are spent in much the same way as these early followers of Jesus who we encounter today, having locked themselves in a room out of fear.

The empty tomb did not result in all the other tombs in that cemetery being empty as well. That empty tomb didn't automatically fix all that was broken in the world, nor did it cause justice to instantly start rolling down like a mighty stream. But what it did signal is that in a broken and fearful world, there is life and an ultimate hope to which we can cling.

In fact when the risen Christ makes his startling appearance in that locked room, his wounds are still fresh. Thomas was not present when it happened and when they told him what had happened, he uttered his famous response, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Everyone comes to faith on their own terms. Last Sunday, two disciples looked into the tomb and saw that it was empty and the text said, they believed. That was it. But not Mary. She looked into the empty tomb and assumed the body had been stolen. She hung around after the two disciples had fled, and it wasn't until the risen Christ addressed her by name that she recognized who it was and then she believed.

Thomas wasn't in the room when the risen Christ simply appeared to the others, nor is Thomas featured in any of the resurrection morning accounts, so we have no way of knowing how he greeted the news of an empty tomb. But if today's text is any indication, then he certainly had his doubts. And who can blame him?

But Thomas has become a kind of universal symbol of doubt, which always seems to carry a negative connotation. But here's the reality. The opposite of doubt isn't faith. The opposite of doubt is certainty, and certainty has nothing whatsoever to do with faith.

And furthermore, where some may have heard pessimism in his response to the news, I wonder if the risen Christ didn't at least see in him the courage to demand what the others secretly wanted to but were afraid to ask. I wonder if Thomas' response wasn't doubt as much as it was raw honesty that came out of a love so deep that he simply wanted to know that news this good was really true.

And who can't relate to that? I know that all too often, I look out into what is supposed to be an Easter world, and yet sometimes all I see and fixate on is our loss of decency in this country. It seems

gone in terms of the way we scandalize the opposition, manhandle our most cherished institutions and view our neighbors with suspicion.

Even the Romans who executed Jesus had a sense that as that Friday wore on, it would be incredibly offensive and simply in bad taste for an execution to spill over into the Sabbath, so they ended it early with a spear to his side. Even the Romans, carrying out a barbaric, unjust murder in the name of the State, had enough decency to end it quickly.

I look out and I want proof that we indeed live in an Easter world, and yet rumors of war and sabre rattling chants about preemptive nuclear strikes seems to suggest otherwise. I look out and I want to see an Easter world and yet sometimes I see the church of Jesus Christ struggling and conflicted, even in decline due to a lack of interest and competing demands, and that doesn't look like an Easter world. I look out into what is supposedly an Easter world, and yet sometimes all I see is people everywhere living with almost unprecedented levels of fear and anxiety—fear so deep that it makes them want to lock themselves away from the world and avoid dealing with it. And it's hard to see this as an Easter world living the way we are these days.

So who can blame Thomas for demanding signs and proof? The next time the risen Christ appeared and Thomas is present, there are no harsh words for Thomas—no judgment on the part of the risen Christ. Instead, and before Thomas can even make his demand to see and touch those wounds, the risen Christ extends his hands toward Thomas and says, "Here, put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out and place your hand in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

And the message in that is that doubt is not a bad thing. In fact, a good case can be made that a healthy amount of doubt can strengthen our faith and not weaken it. Galileo called doubt the father of all discovery. And I like what William Sloan Coffin says about it. Coffin says,

There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us that much more to think about (*Credo*, p. 8).

In the most recent issue of the journal *Image*, Minneapolis writer Stina Kiesmeier-Cook has written a lovely piece entitled "The Doubt that Breathes Beside You." It is a poignant reflection about her husband's loss of faith. They had each come from conservative Christian homes and met at a small Evangelical college. They grew up and came of age in an intense, religious environment that focused almost solely on personal piety.

Faith, she says, was easy then because it was simply in the air they breathed. But when they graduated and left that small, protective pool in which they'd been swimming for their entire lives, it felt like getting sucked out into the wider ocean. And that's where things got difficult. So her husband's loss of faith not only shook her, but caused her to doubt and question her own faith as well.

She writes this,

I attend church most Sundays while my husband goes to a nearby coffee shop to read or study. Somehow his absence frees me to sit and experience the service inside my own mind instead of filtering each potentially offensive thing through what I imagine to be his. Now I sit alone and search for my own thoughts, my own faith.

I often sit down in an empty pew toward the back and stare at the words in the bulletin, my mind not registering the announcements about the upcoming prayer meetings and office hours for the pastor. Then the piano drums out the notes of the next hymn, and the congregation stands and sings:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

And, somehow, despite my inattention, I find myself weeping. *How silly*, I think as I snuff back tears in the midst of that tiny, singing church, this faith community that continues to meet each Sunday even as the world rages. I grasp the hard wooden pew in front of me to steady myself. I am aware that I am standing alone, but I hang on tight. It feels solid and sure in my grip.

If you are a person of wavering or foundering faith, if the Easter claims seem too good to be true, if, for whatever reason, what you need now more than anything else is hope, I invite you to lean into the living Christ and experience God's presence in ways both new and familiar, and to hear those words spoken in a locked room long ago as they are spoken to you this day, "Peace be with you."

Amen.