

THE STEWARDSHIP OF DOUBT

the Rev. Beth Hoffman Faeth

Minister for Congregational Care & Worship

April 11, 2021

Text: John 20:19–31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Temple authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side, the marks of his crucifixion. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, “Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I am sending you.” When he had said this, Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen Jesus!” But Thomas said to them, “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.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Savior and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Only Begotten, and that through believing you may have life in Jesus’ name.

* * *

It begins with the panting. Then comes the shaking, followed by the pacing. Then there’s a pause with the most forlorn heartbreaking look. Then the cycle begins again and again and again. Any dog owner watching may empathize. Shuddering in fear, hearing the crash of thunder long before any human ear, doubting she will ever feel safe in her own home again, vacillating between being glued to my leg or in the farthest, darkest, most isolated corner of the house: this is life with my dog during any kind of weather event. And because this week has brought consecutive nights of Minnesota spring thunderstorms, loud and raucous with lightening illuminating the night sky, sleep has come only in small incremental doses as I bear witness to the panting, shaking, pacing; repeat.

My dog’s storm anxiety reminds me of the disciples following the first Easter. Really! Last Sunday DeWayne implored us to go to Galilee—a place outside our comfort zone, a place of despair and oppression—and that is where we will see Jesus and know resurrection. DeWayne’s words still ring in our ears, shake up our hearts: “Go back to where Jesus began his own ministry,” DeWayne charges, “loving, healing, and forgiving, recklessly and indiscriminately, daring to make the dispossessed and disinherited feel included and blessed. . . . Go to the homeless encampments because Jesus has gone there ahead of us and we might catch a glimpse of resurrection there. Go to where George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice were killed because Jesus has gone there ahead of us and we might see a

resurrection. Go to any prison or ICE detention center because Jesus has gone there ahead of us and we might possibly witness a resurrection.”

The disciples didn't hear DeWayne's sermon. They did not go to Galilee. Instead they clustered together behind locked doors, fear paralyzing them, doubt defeating them: panting, shaking, pacing; repeat. They did not believe they would find Jesus in Galilee or anywhere, and they had no idea what the future would hold.

Well, all the disciples except one. Thomas was not a part of the cloistered group, so he missed what happens next. Jesus ignores the barrier of a locked door and comes to them, in a first post-resurrection appearance, offering them peace and breathing them back into the living community to practice life. And when Thomas is told of Jesus' return, he balks. He questions. He doubts. He is our Thomas—the incredulous skeptic who hides inside every proclaimed believer—the questioner in us that resists easy answers to hard questions of faith, who always wants a little more proof. Thomas will not be shamed into believing, or shamed into at least keeping his unbelief to himself. Neither will Thomas ignore what he knows in order to believe something he does not know. Thomas is essential to the story because he articulates what we have all felt but perhaps were afraid to utter—a need for proof, a confession of doubt, an insistence of evidence. God is mysterious and obscure and intimate and everywhere and still, sometimes, don't you just want to see Jesus in order to believe?

In these weeks between Easter and Pentecost, which this year falls on May 23, the clergy of Plymouth look forward to exploring stewardship with you. “Wait!” you might protest, “Don't we usually do stewardship in the fall as a campaign to build pledges and solicit giving?” Yes, and stewardship is much broader than what we do with our money, although DeWayne is on the docket to tackle that significant kind of stewardship in a few weeks, so you will not be disappointed. Merriam-Webster defines stewardship as “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.” Earth Sunday is April 25, and we are called to care responsibly for the earth. As people bound by covenant—a topic we explored in the weeks leading to Easter—we are also stewards of love and stewards of compassion and stewards of witness and even stewards of loss. And if we hold a faith that has any kind of meaning at all, then we are also, like Thomas, stewards of doubt. We cannot believe naively, in a vacuum. An informed faith is a questioning faith, and we would not be the complicated beings we are if we did not wonder where God is in the midst of it all—how could the Divine matter to us if we didn't question her existence, if we didn't explore the mysteries of scripture, spirit and science? Doubt does not indicate a lack of faith. As theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich has written, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.” I know that many of you have been impacted by the words and thoughts of Rainer Maria Rilke, who ponders the essence of doubt through these words from *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

So we must tend our doubts about God like a good steward—paying good attention to the questions in our hearts and allowing them to sing aloud rather than stifle in silence. Having doubts is not the same as giving up; rather, it is an avenue towards a deeper, richer faith. Yet being a steward of doubt also means having the courage to articulate the questions. Thomas did not take the others' word that Jesus appeared. He wanted to see Jesus, examine his battered body so that Thomas could fully acknowledge the pain and the suffering, and then look in Jesus' eyes and see the face of God. Isn't that what we also so desperately seek: To look into the eyes of another and see the face of God? To believe in what we see? To trust what we feel? To embrace what we know? We have many Galilees yet to visit and many battered bodies to minister, many resurrections waiting to be witnessed. And we will take our doubt with us as we go, unpacking it stop-by-stop, when we truly acknowledge the divine in another.

Why wasn't Thomas with the others locked away when Jesus came to call? Perhaps he was out living his questions, seeking resurrection, going to Galilee. What we do know from our scripture passage is that Thomas remains in community even with his doubt. A week later, when Jesus shows up again, Thomas is there with the disciples. Notice how Jesus does not come to scold but to bless, and the author of the gospel assures the reader that Jesus has a blessing for us as well, an opportunity for those who stay with the community to believe, even when we are stewarding doubt and embracing our questions. As the certain and uncertain stand together to love and to serve, we manifest our common conviction that a community of faith depends foremost not on what we can get our hearts and heads around but on the God who gives us those hearts and hands and works in and through them, often in ways beyond our limits. Easter proclaims not how far we can reach but how God draws us to new life.

Another Doubting Thomas, this one with the last name of Merton, reminds us: "We too often forget that the Christian faith is a principle of questioning and struggle before it becomes a principle of certainty and of peace. One has to doubt and reject everything else in order to believe firmly, and after one has begun to believe, one's faith itself must be tested and purified."¹ Panting, shaking, pacing; repeat.

Last week we cried, "Alleluia, Christ is Risen!" And this week we lock ourselves in with the disciples questioning everything, doubting anything that might lead to a miracle. And it is no wonder: The George Floyd murder trial continues; our siblings of color awake every day to renewed trauma; 20,000 migrant children are held in detention at our southern border without their parents; COVID variants induce illness in harsh, unsettling ways—so many questions to live, so much doubt to steward. Where is our resurrected God now?

Author Nora Gallagher offers a perspective as we empathize with the doubters and nonbelievers, who just may be us. She writes:

When I think about the resurrection now, I not only wonder about what happened to Jesus. I ponder what happened to his disciples. Something happened to them, too. They went into hiding after the crucifixion, but after the resurrection appearances, they walked back out into the world. They became braver and stronger; they visited strangers, and healed the sick. It was not just what they saw when they saw Jesus, or how they saw it, but what was set free in them. . . . What if the resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone, but also about what those appearances point to, what they ask? It's finally what we do with them that matters; make them into superstitions or use them as stepping stones to new life."²

Live into your questions, my friends. Speak your doubt out loud. And do so within this beloved community, because we will stand with you. We will bless and not chastise you. We will embrace your doubts, trusting their capacity for a deeper faith. And together, in community, even when fear constrains us, let us go to Galilee. Because resurrection awaits us there, even after Easter Day.

Amen.

¹Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1968.

²Nora Gallagher, *Practicing Resurrection*, 2004.