
One Day, One Doubt, at a Time

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A sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe".

What powerful, mysterious words these are; made all the more remarkable when we think about the disciples, about whom we tend to forget as we celebrate Easter. After Jesus was betrayed they scattered, afraid for their own lives. They watched the events unfold, but always from a distance, blending into the crowd of spectators. Jesus had been crucified. There could be no mistaking this, and the disciples were scared, and sad, and angry. And even as they learn that crucifixion hadn't been the end of it, in the Gospel lesson for today we find them behind locked doors, hiding together in fear in the upper room. They hardly give the appearance of a movement about to change the course of history. No doubt the words of the women at the tomb were ringing in their ears, only worsening their isolation and fear: "**They have taken away our Lord and we do not know where they have taken him.**" Suddenly Jesus appears, and speaks those remarkable words; "Peace be with you." And he breathes upon them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

But where was Thomas? Perhaps he needed to be alone. He needed time to think, to question, to get a purchase, as my grandfather used to say, on the events swirling around him. Perhaps he did his best thinking alone. Maybe he went to that place we all go, in the midst of deep grief, where we may believe that no one can reach us, even if it is not true. It's easy to be drawn to Thomas because he seems so human, he seems like so many of us. After all, it was Thomas who asked Jesus how they could know the way. Jesus replied "I am the way, the truth, and the life". But Thomas needed proof. He was perhaps among the first purveyors of the scientific, hypothetico-deductive method, His hypothesis in this case was that unless he saw the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands and unless he put his hand in Jesus' side, he would not believe.

The elegant beauty of the scientific method is that it allows us to test one hypothesis against others. And this is often how we learn. By doubting, we gain wisdom and knowledge. Jesus understood this. He was not critical of Thomas. Rather, he affirmed Thomas in his doubting, and helped him move through it to faith. He understood Thomas' initial skepticism, as if to say: "Doubting is nothing to be ashamed of, indeed, having doubts is a part of what it means to be human." Martin Luther King, who died 45 years ago this last week, said that "**Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.**" Take that first step he is telling us, assuming the rest will be there, even if you have doubts and fears. Believe that as long as you keep going, you will arrive. Thomas' first step was to place his hand in the wound Jesus showed him.

It's easy to have empathy for Thomas because we can recall times in our lives when we felt the same way; times when it seemed that we were lost, and questioned our faith. The world of Jesus' followers had been turned upside down and was in utter chaos. I can only imagine their dismay and anxiety. And when the other disciples sought Thomas out, they told him they had seen the Jesus, but Thomas could not believe them. Another week passed, and one imagines Thomas off on his own again in his solitary disbelief. And at some point he goes back and joins the others, and Jesus shows Thomas his wounds, and he falls on his knees and exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas had two great virtues: he absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There was an uncompromising honesty about him. He would never respond to the anxiety of his own doubts by pretending they did not exist. I think Jesus is reminding Thomas, and by extension all of us, that it is relationship that heals. He reaches out to

Thomas in his isolation and doubt and offers to be in relationship with him.

It is not doubt that is the enemy. Rather, it is responding to that doubt by cutting ourselves off from others, from relationship" which is most risky. And we are most likely to do this when, like the disciples, we are scared, sad, angry, and lost, and we hide ourselves behind closed doors. Each of us knows how it feels to be in exile, hiding behind locked doors, literally or metaphorically, and filled with doubt. And often what locks us in are our fears, insecurities, illnesses, compulsions or addictions, past hurts we have experienced and hurts we have caused. In a real sense, *sin is anything which separates us from others, and from ourselves, and from God*. And I wonder if we have more of this separation and disconnection these days.

The late 19th century, the world of Freud's Vienna, was known as the age of anxiety and melancholy. More recently, ours has been called the age of narcissism; and several weeks ago a clinical colleague of mine observed that we are seeing more and more disorders of the type associated with an inability to connect with and become attached to other human beings" an age, perhaps, of detachment. Each of these is, of course, a variation on a theme of the human condition. But Jesus presents an alternative to each of these. And I have seen it in action.

A few weeks ago I attended the "birthday" in the AA sense of the term" of a friend who was celebrating his ninth year of sobriety. I first met him in 1978 when we worked on the adolescent psychiatric unit at Peachford Hospital, and we became friends. We worked together there for 3 years. And it was there that I met my wife, and where I moved from the world of neuroscience to a trial year in Divinity School and, well, that road less traveled has made all the difference. And, as the poet said, way leads on to way, and my life and that of my friend took different paths, but we kept in touch. I knew he had struggled with alcohol, but until I heard his story, I did not realize the depth of his addiction. And so on a cold and rainy night some 35 years after we met, I drove up to Cherokee County, and after getting turned around several times, finally found the location of the meeting. I walked into a room filled to capacity" maybe 70-80 souls, a good number of whom were members of a local motorcycle group in recovery. They eyed me cautiously, dressed like the professor I had been that day, and I them, dressed like, well, a motorcycle gang, and finally one of them came up to me, shook my hand and smiled, and said welcome, we are glad you are here.

That night I heard the testimony of those who know my friend, and stories of life before and after sobriety. I was deeply moved by the openness, shared vulnerability, and honesty of this group. And I heard my friend tell how, at age 51, drinking almost killed him, and how he'd said to many of those gathered in that very room, some nine years earlier, ***"I am lost. Tell me what to do, and if you just tell me what I should do, I will do it."*** And then he said, through tears of one who has come back from the edge of the abyss, ***"You saved my life, you know, I asked, and you gave, and you told me to work each step, and that you would be there with me each step of the way. And you were. And I slowly came back to life. I am here tonight, standing up here talking to you, because you people saved my life."***

And so you see, dear ones, those gathered souls had chosen not to remain trapped behind the locked doors of their addictions. They had chosen to be in relationship, out in the open. And in order to do this, they had to face with brutal honesty" a searching, fearless, and unrelenting moral inventory" the truth of what had kept them in bondage. Diane Ackerman writes about the relatively new field of interpersonal neurobiology. She describes one of the great discoveries of our era: that the brain is constantly rewiring itself based on daily life. In the end, what we pay attention to defines us. How we choose to spend the irreplaceable hours of our life literally transforms us. And, it is the intimate bonds that falter or fail us that are most important. Supportive relationships are the most robust predictor of positive attributes across the life-span. "When your brain knows you are with someone you trust," Ackerman writes, "it needn't waste precious resources coping with stress or menace. ... it is in loving relationships of all sorts" partners, children, close friends, pets" that mind and body really thrive."

Times of doubt do come and will come as they did for Thomas. But he was among friends, and he was willing to be vulnerable enough to say he did not know. Like Thomas, the disciples had to ask tough questions and reach into that wounded place in their souls. As a result of my Cherokee County sojourn, I found myself moved and inspired by this connection of relationships, and I understood my friend a little better too, understood the power of the Paschal Mystery of Easter a bit more clearly: that in the phrase "one day at a time" we see the truth of that mystery. In Christ, darkness has indeed been overcome" is overcome" one day, one moment at a time, here and now. And not just any darkness but the darkness that finds us hidden from ourselves and from relationship with others. Jesus felt the deep pain of suffering" his

and ours” and through his resulting scars and resurrection, we are able to find redemption. We are able to feel hope and renewal. Our wounds, whether visible to the eye or not, are something we all have in common” something everyone shares. To be vulnerable, and to tell the bold truth about our lives and admit how and where we hurt is uncomfortable and risky. It is the place where shame lives, which is the fear of disconnection.

And yet in doing so, in being courageously vulnerable” just like Thomas, paradoxically, we find our deepest strength, the source of our resilience. And this is where we can experience that same type of transformative moment” the move from fear to joy and hope” that the disciples had when exposed to the wounds of Jesus. The Good News is that, like Thomas we are called to move through times of doubt to moments of grace. And if we have been honest in our doubt, amidst the vulnerability of being lost, our faith will be more honest and clear and committed as we move along our journey. The way of vulnerability, as Thomas learned, is the way into wholeheartedness, joy, gratitude, and compassion. "**Practice Resurrection,**" that wonderful writer Wendell Berry says to us. And every time we choose to do this, the grace-filled Easter story continues. When I got home that night, I sent my old friend a message thanking him for the gift of his story, and for inviting me into that sacred space. He wrote a text message in response that read: "**Life; Chaos; Recovery; Resurrection; Gratitude.**" And I found myself thinking that is almost like , I would say that is exactly like the Holy Spirit of Christ had been breathed upon us in that room, the doors of which had been flung open by the grace of my friend's story. And when that happens, because we have asked for it, we can participate in the co-creation of the compassionate kingdom of God, *one day, one doubt at a time, right now, and forever and ever, Amen.*