

Faith vs. Doubt  
John 20:19-31  
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How do you follow a week like last Sunday? That was probably the best Easter I've experienced since I've been here at Crestwood. The sanctuary was filled with lilies and tulips, the choir and orchestra were outstanding, everyone was dressed in their Sunday best. What a day! But now, the last notes of the Hallelujah Chorus have faded and the only thing left in the Easter baskets are a few strands of plastic grass. About the only saving grace of the post-Easter letdown is that Reese's eggs are all 50% off. He is risen, indeed!

Last week it was easy to shout "He is risen!" and truly believe in God's resurrection power. But now a week has gone by, a week filled with harsh reminders that life still goes on, regardless of what last Sunday was like. Even in the midst of our celebration last week, we learned of the horrific violence in Sri Lanka. And even in our own lives, Easter has started to fade. There are still bills to be paid and losses to deal with and things to get done. Life has changed since last Sunday. And it's changed for the disciples, as well. We aren't reading about rolled away stones and empty tombs and dazzling angels. No, today it's locked doors and disturbing doubts and fearful disciples, who've slipped back into their Good Friday paranoia.

In the midst of that paralyzing fear, Jesus comes to them through locked doors and offers them what they need most at this hour -- peace. Jesus also has some follow-up instructions for them: "As the father has sent me, so I send you." He breathes into them the Holy Spirit, anointing them to do God's work of forgiveness. So, there we have it! The disciples' fear is wiped away by the risen Lord and replaced with peace and assurance and a sending forth to be the church and spread God's love and forgiveness and everybody hugs and high-fives and lives happily ever after. Cue the credits and the theme music. A nice, tidy ending to our story.

Except for Thomas. While the other disciples were getting their marching orders from Jesus, Thomas was AWOL. We aren't sure where he was, why he wasn't with the others. We all deal with grief in different ways. Maybe he was praying, maybe he was getting drunk, maybe he just needed to be alone. Whatever the reason, Thomas wasn't there.

When the disciples came to him with their glorious news, all filled with excitement and stumbling to get their words out, Thomas crossed his arms, shook his head, and refused to believe. There are a lot of things in life we'll believe without seeing, but for Thomas, a resurrected savior is not one of those things. "Show me," he says and thus earns the unfortunate nickname Doubting Thomas, as if the struggle to believe was a bad thing.

But the Bible has in it a rich history of doubters, and Thomas is just taking his place alongside other folks who dared to doubt. Doubting Abraham laughed in disbelief when God told him his 90-year-old wife Sarah was going to give birth. Doubting Moses told God several times that he had the wrong guy when God tapped him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. And Doubting Peter asked Jesus to let him walk across the Sea of Galilee, but got a nose full of sea water when he started to doubt. Abraham doubted. Moses doubted. Peter and the rest of the disciples doubted. So, if you have doubts about God, you're in good company, and we can add Thomas to that list. If those people doubted, and they made it into the Bible, then having doubts can't be all wrong, can it?

Do you ever have doubts? I do. I sometimes doubt the extent of God's power, or I doubt the breadth of God's love, or I doubt the reach of God's forgiveness. Is God powerful enough to

silence a tornado? Is God's love big enough to include those who actively practice racism? Can God forgive a child molester? You might think it's wrong to question God this way, but Author Jacqueline Bussie calls it "audacious why-asking." Sometimes, my only answer to these questions is, "I don't know." Is that OK for me to admit? Do I still have a job? I know I shouldn't, but like Thomas, I have my doubts.

Some people will tell you that faith and doubt are opposites, that if you have faith, you have no reason to doubt, and if you doubt, you must not be faithful. But I don't think that's true. I side with Rob Bell, who said that faith and doubt are excellent dance partners. Doubts are questions asked from inside faith, not outside of it. If you didn't have faith, there would be nothing to doubt. But if you have faith and try to live it out, you're going to run up against some really hard questions that will cause you to doubt.

The opposite of doubt isn't faith, it's certainty. I wish my faith was that strong, that I could be certain about everything. But I find life to be too ambiguous to be certain about many things. To have a faith of absolute certainty, you either have to be perfect, which none of us are, or so narrow-minded that there's no room for questions, which none of us are, either. We have faith, we want to believe, but sometimes, like Thomas, we need something more than words or books or second-hand testimony; we need to experience Christ for ourselves. Doubt is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of a strong, vibrant faith, a searching and active faith. Frederick Beuchner once said, "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. It keeps us awake and moving."

I think all of us, when faced with the story of the resurrection, respond at some level with disbelief. How can you not? What we're talking about – coming back from the dead – is physically impossible. And yet I think we are so familiar with this story that we run the risk of taking it for granted. I heard a comedian once joke about how we do this in our daily lives. He said, "I heard a lady complaining the other day about how her plane sat on the runway for 40 minutes before takeoff. I wanted to say to her, 'And then what did you do? Did you sit in a chair and FLY through the AIR?'" The comedian said, "Everybody on every plane should constantly be going, 'Oh my gosh! Wow! We're flying!'"

I think our world has made us jaded to the miracles around us like technology and flight. We've come to expect to have the internet in our pockets and complain when it's not fast enough. And when it comes to resurrection, we've heard the story so many times that we're prone to hear it without realizing the magnitude of what has happened. To understand Thomas' doubts, you have to put yourself in his sandals. If someone came up to you and said, "The guy we watched die horrifically on the cross three days ago is walking through walls and bringing us words of peace," how can you respond with anything but, "I don't believe it?"

But how many of us heard the story of Easter last week and left the sanctuary going, "Resurrection? I don't believe it!" A man rose from the dead. He was dead. Now he's alive. Every one of us, everybody who professes belief in Christ, should constantly be going, "Oh my gosh! Wow! Resurrection!"

In a sense, that's what Thomas does. After expressing his doubt, he's not shunned or ridiculed. He's not told he just needs to have more faith. Jesus takes his doubt seriously and answers Thomas. He comes to him and says, "See my hands? See my side? See what I did for you? Touch and believe." And Thomas responds with the greatest statement of faith in the whole Bible: "My Lord and my God!"

Because of his doubts, his searching, his questioning, Thomas found a deeper, richer faith. Do you know when, though? It wasn't on Easter Sunday, or the next day, or the next day. It was eight days after Easter. That would be tomorrow. That's pretty significant. Can you think of

a less inspirational day to come to faith than a Monday? It's easy to believe on Easter, when the pews are packed and the choir is rocking and the joy is overflowing. On Easter, it's easy to cry out, "My Lord and my God!"

But have you ever tried doing it eight days after Easter? On a Monday, of all days? When the lilies are gone, when the Easter hats are packed away, when all the discount Reese's eggs have been eaten. Can we still make the same confession tomorrow that we made last Sunday? A doubtless faith can't do that. I believe only a faith that has asked the tough questions and persevered in the search for answers can proclaim Jesus as messiah eight days after Easter. I bet those were a long eight days for Thomas, waiting, wondering, doubting. We know what those days are like, don't we? To wait. To wonder. To doubt.

But I believe Jesus built the church around folks like Thomas. There's a reason our mission statement says that we "invite questions about how faith and life intersect." People who ask questions are the cornerstone of the church, people who hear the Good News and scratch their head and say, "Risen? No, I can't believe it." Christ's church is meant to be made up of people with ants in their pants, whose faith is kept awake and moving by their questions and the search for answers.

And I believe Jesus answers us. Just as Thomas was given the invitation to touch and feel, we are given the invitation to taste and see. Each time we come to communion, we are reminded that the risen Christ is among us, bringing peace, offering forgiveness, sharing the Holy Spirit. Communion is our opportunity to ask our questions, name our fears, hear words of assurance like "This is my body, broken for you," and then to respond faithfully. When you taste the bread, when you drink the cup, Christ says to you, "I am here." And we are compelled to respond, "Oh my gosh! Wow! Resurrection!"

Another quote from Beuchner, who said, "An agnostic is someone who is not sure whether there is a God. That is some of us all of the time, and all of us some of the time." If he's right, and my experience tells me he is, at some point in our lives, we all doubt. Look at this world we live in, at Sri Lanka and San Diego and Pittsburgh. How can we not at times have doubt? If Thomas, who was there, still doubted, how can we, even the most faithful among us, not doubt when faced with the reality of life?

I hope you have doubts. I hope you have persistent questions about God. I hope you engage in "audacious why-asking." I hope you never are faced with the awesomeness of God's work and say without passion, "Yep, I believe it." I hope you keep asking questions and voicing concerns and expressing doubts, because the story of Thomas shows us that when we are willing to voice our doubts, Jesus shows up. And when Jesus shows up – through a particularly moving hymn, or a well-timed hug, or a simple cup and loaf – we are moved to respond with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" Even in the midst of your Monday doubts, never forget that Sunday is coming, and it will be Easter all over again. Keep asking. Keep looking. You never know when Jess will show up. Oh my gosh! Wow! Resurrection!