

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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Clarksburg, WV

John 20:19-31

(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." (John 20:25 N.R.S.V.)

Doubting Our Doubts

Some of us are old enough to remember when the driver's licence exam contained questions about hand signals. Back in the age before every car had turn signals, drivers were supposed to stick their hand out the window of the vehicle to indicate their intent. Arm straight out meant a left turn. Arm bent up at the elbow meant right turn. Arm bent down at the elbow meant slowing or stop.

One day our Driver's Ed instructor asked our class, suppose you are following a driver and she first sticks her arm straight out the window, then bent up at the elbow, then bent down at the elbow. What can you be sure of? Most of us answered something along the lines of, "the driver is about to do something." But the teacher shook his head, "The only thing you can be certain of," he said, "is that the window is open."

It hard to be certain about anything in this world. That is even more true when it comes to matters of faith. In our scripture from John, all of the disciples believe except for Thomas. Thomas is often referred to as a negative example of faith. "Don't be a doubting Thomas." Yet when you think about it, Thomas was not different than the other disciples.

Jesus first appeared to some of the women. When the women told the men disciples, the men did not believe. Luke tells us the men thought it was an idle tale. So Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room. Only then did they believe. All of them except Thomas that is. We have no idea why Thomas was not there. We just know he wasn't there.

So when the others tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord," he refuses to believe. He wants to be able to see and touch Jesus for himself. Which is only right. That was what the other disciples had been able to do.

It is worth noting that once Thomas sees the risen Jesus for himself he does believe without hesitation.

So here is the question. Is it wrong to have doubts about our faith?

I would submit to you that struggling with doubt is part of coming to faith. Further that it is only by struggling through doubt that we grow into mature faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is apathy.

Thomas struggled with doubt. So did every other hero of the faith. Doubt is one of the tools that God uses to raise up strong people of faith.

Look, God could have arranged the world in such a way that there would be no doubt. God could have given us good satisfying answers to questions like, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” God could have given us a guide book that was not open to so many different interpretations. God could give each of us a burning bush moment like he gave Moses. Jesus could personally appear to each of us like he did for Thomas. Yet God has done none of these things.

Woody Allen once said that he would have no difficulty believing in God. All God would have to do would be to deposit a million dollars in a Swiss Bank account in Woody’s name.

God could remove all doubt. Instead God has chosen doubt as a way to strengthen us in faith. It is like an obstacle course for athletes in training. If athletes do not push themselves in training, they do not grow in strength and stamina.

Does it help you to think of doubt and frustration as part of the obstacle course God uses for training us in faith? It helps me.

I know there are some churches that discourage people from expressing doubts. I think that is counterproductive. If you use the brain that God has given you, you are going to have some doubts. That isn’t a bad thing. It means you are struggling, growing, moving in faith.

I love the quote by Frederick Buechner, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep faith alive and moving.”

However, there comes a time when if we would know the full joy of God, “We must doubt our doubts.” We must come to the point where we realize that the world does not have the answers we so desperately need.

The poet, Robert Louis Stevenson grew up in a strict Calvinist family in Scotland. When he went off to college, he rebelled against his upbringing. He referred to it as, “the deadliest gag and wet blanket that can be laid on a man.” He adopted a thoroughly bohemian lifestyle. He referred to himself as “a youthful atheist.”

As he became older, Stevenson began to have doubts about his doubts. He realized that for all the world’s claim to wisdom, the world had no satisfying answers to the deepest questions of life. Stevenson would later write, “there is a God who is manifest for those who care to look for him.”

In time Stevenson became a man of deep and profound faith. He referred to his faith as “cast-iron faith.” (Dynamic Preaching, April - June 2017, pg. 26)

As I look back on my own journey in faith, I realize that it was not a straight line advancement. It would be more accurate to describe it as a spiral. The doubts and struggles I have endured have not only led me away from where I started, but have also led me back. Hopefully a little higher this time than the time before.

One of my seminary professors upset the class because he said we had to let go of our “Sunday School faith.” We thought he was mocking what we had learned in Sunday School. One of my classmates said after class, “There is nothing wrong with what I learned in Sunday School. Mrs. Evans would not lie to me!”

In time I found out, Dr. Edwards was not mocking what we had learned in Sunday School. Instead he was inviting us to struggle, to doubt, to ask the hard questions so that our faith became truly our own. He wanted us to push beyond simply accepting someone else’s experience and to experience God for ourselves.

At one point I believed that God answers prayer because my Sunday School teacher told me so. And Mrs. Sutton would not lie to me!

But then I began to realize that it wasn’t that simple. Sometimes people prayed for a safe journey and they were in an accident along the way. Sometimes people prayed for a sick child to get better and the child died. Sometimes people did get what they prayed for, but sometimes they didn’t.

So I had to struggle with doubts. How can a good and loving God allow such terrible things to happen? In time I found myself coming back to the assurance that God does answer prayer, but now with the added clause that prayer is request. And God answers in his time and in his wisdom.

There comes a time when we must doubt our doubts. Along with that, it is necessary to understand that Christian faith can only be proven from within.

You cannot prove faith using the scientific method. You cannot find God using a telescope or a microscope. Nor will you be able to argue someone into faith using ration and logic. Faith can only be proven from within.

It is like trying to prove the concept of being in love. We can hook someone up to instruments that will register raised heart beat and dilated pupils but that doesn’t prove they are in love. Some people get elevated heart beat and dilated pupils around chocolate cake!

You can’t really explain in words what it means to be in love, though we have certainly tried. The only way to prove love is to experience it yourself.

So it is with faith. As the old hymn says, “You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.”

There are two more quick points that I want to make. One is that the best way to struggle through faith is in the company of believers. It has become common in our society to regard the church as irrelevant. Yet one of the greatest tasks of the community of faith is to hold us up when we are drowning in doubt. Thomas doubted. But he remained in the company of the other disciples. It is doubtful that he would have regained his faith had he simply decided to leave and not come back.

The second point is that by struggling through doubt we become mighty men and women for God. Jesus gave Thomas what he needed in order to push through his doubt and believe.

Legend has it that Thomas went on to establish the Christian Church in India. In fact if you go there today you will find in South India a church called the Thomist Church.

Thomas was a doubter. Yet Jesus did not condemn him for that. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” But Jesus also gave Thomas what he needed and helped him do great things for God.

If you have doubts today, do not despair. It could be that God is preparing you for greatness.

Amen.