

Sermon April 19, 2009  
2 Easter  
John 20:19-31

For all the doubters out there, this is the story of my unbelief.

When I was little my poor father made an attempt to educate me in Christianity. When I was very little, going to church on occasion was a frightening experience. I fainted once. Felt sick to my stomach, nervous, uncomfortable. The churches we went to were these old dark stone buildings. Inside was hot and crowded. Everyone was taller than me, and there was a lot of standing & sitting & mumbo-jumbo up front that I couldn't see. I did not know what was going on. Worst of all, I had to wear a dress with a hat, & probably even white gloves. It made no sense. This was not me. I hated all of it. At home every week Dad tried to read to me from the Bible, & we would look at atlases & maps. I would get fidgety & bored, and then if he realized I wasn't paying attention & couldn't answer his questions, he would read it all over again. It was just more book-learning like I was going to school.

Then when I was 13, my mother & I were baptized & confirmed in the Episcopal Church. More book-learning. I remember attending classes, sitting at a desk, and having work-books. By then I was old enough not to be frightened of church, but the ritual of confirmation involved lots of people, having to wear white, & a lot of talking & fancy costumes & paraphernalia, all presided over by a large grand Pooh-Bah. It seemed too primitively pagan to have anything to do with me, a 13 yr old shy quiet tom-boy, or my daily life. It had no meaning for me, and in my mind, it was just a rather exotic, intimidating institution. It told me nothing about God.

40 yrs later, I have had time to learn much more about the church. I am grateful to have been somewhat raised in the Episcopal tradition because I find them fairly liberal now. And it was the church I turned to in my early 20s when thrown out into the real world I began to have questions about life, religion & faith. I have found St. Nick's to be radically different than the churches I remember as a child, probably because here there is such a sense of belonging, and group ownership. After more than 20 yrs I still feel like I belong here. This place has inspired me to read the Bible, study, discuss & take classes on my own terms. I have thought about God, & prayed about Jesus. I have wrapped my arms around the mystery of faith and swum through some pretty murky water. I have gone to sleep at night feeling love for the Creator, and sometimes woken up in the despair of grief. In the process I have developed some sort of pretty firm personal philosophy that is rooted in who I am and what I know. But above all I have come to love the mystery of not being sure, the mystery of doubt. I have to think that God wants us to be engaged, in any way that we can, with Him, with People, with the Story. Jesus does not ignore Thomas because of his disbelief, his needing proof – he engages him – he says reach out & touch my wounds, see my hands. This tells me, happy are they that don't need proof, but it's also OK to doubt, as long as you are willing to be engaged in the journey that leads to belief. That journey for some may be a lifetime, and the meaning of belief in

Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, the bodily resurrection and eternal life or whatever else may be mystery for me until the day I die, at which point I certainly hope to find out what God is talking about.

What I love about being a free thinker, is that I am allowed to read scripture, history, commentaries, grapple with the story, analyze it, & see how it makes me feel, how it affects my world view, and see how it makes sense to me. because I know there is universal truth in what the Bible has to say, no matter who you are or when you are and that it can be a very personal truth. As I thought about the story of Mary of Magdala at the empty tomb and the story of Thomas I see 2 sides/things happening. One is a person testifying to something that they believe is true, and then you have a reaction to that, in the form of doubt.

We can't know what really happened to Thomas or Mary. We can only know of our own experiences and those of other people around us. Have you ever had someone tell you something that was beyond belief? That went against anything you have encountered in your life? Or perhaps you yourself had an experience. We testify reluctantly at times, and with good reason, out of fear or ridicule perhaps. The story says that Mary of Magdala had an experience at the tomb of Jesus, and when she told the Apostles in the Gospel of Luke, they thought it was nonsense, and didn't believe her. There is a tension of sorts. Thomas does not believe the testimony of the other Apostles. He needs to get his hands dirty in order to come to some conclusion.

So here's the thing. We shouldn't be afraid to testify to what we have experienced as the truth. And we shouldn't be afraid to doubt. We are not going to be condemned by God for doubting. We have the breath of the Holy Spirit – the power to forgive – which according to Webster's dictionary means to give up resentment against or the desire to punish. So I don't think God is going to resent or punish us for doubting. It's us, being who we are. I really don't think doubt is a sin. Jesus does not scold Thomas for doubting. Don't be anxious or worry that there are some things you cannot accept right now. Here's my radical thought - Belief is not a prerequisite for going to heaven. You don't have to accept every tenet of the doctrine in order to have a relationship with God.

I would hope that God just wants us to be open, to listen, to testify, to question, to use our brains, to make connections & maybe even come to some conclusions. This is what is exciting to me about the process of faith, like it's a verb rather than a noun. I don't think you have to start with a set of rules, book-learning, facts or doctrine. More power to you if you are grounded in a faith tradition from an early age. Happy are those who have not seen & yet have come to believe. But for people like me, talking about ideas, and wondering, and questioning authority and making connections is the stuff of faith. Happy are those who are willing to put their fingers in the wounds, because God will invite you in.

Amen.