

CRISIS OF FAITH

John 20:19-31

Consider the following scenarios: You have just been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer that doctor's really have no way of treating and are not able to offer you much hope. Your child has just told you they are leaving the church because they think the Bible is just a bunch of fairy tales; churches are filled with hypocrites; religion is the cause of all the problems in the world; and anyway, they find God much more in nature than in bricks and concrete. Your spouse of 25+ years has told you he or she wants a divorce because they are finally going to claim who they really are as a transgender person. And finally, you witness a murder by the mob so the FBI places you in the witness protection program, placing you in a dying church as the associate pastor. Neither you or your wife are believers and during your very first Sunday service, the senior pastor keels over and dies leaving you the new senior pastor; talk about a crisis of faith!!

In my 20+ years in ministry I have encountered all but one of the above crises of faith. If you had to guess, which of the above scenarios does not belong?? Yes, the last one. It is kind of a no brainer but is the actual plot of a movie by the name of "Can I Get a Witness Protection?" on Amazon Prime!! The movie which starts out as a rather slapstick comedy of errors actually turns into a rather amazing story of conversion and transformation, with spot on theology and the Good News of Jesus Christ. I highly recommend it!

I would imagine that if we were to take a quick poll around this morning's congregation, we would find that each person here past a certain age has experienced a crisis of faith at some point in their life. You may in fact currently be in the middle of one right now. Crises of faith are not foreign to strong believers, contrary to what some televangelists may try to tell you, they are part and parcel of every faithful person's journey. All throughout the gospels we encounter person's struggling with life's challenges, and we see Jesus addressing them in their need. There is one particular crisis of faith, however, which has gone down in the history of the church as borderline blasphemy. Poor Thomas has been forever marked as "Doubting Thomas," when in reality he has done the supreme favor to any person who does struggle with their faith. If, one of the faithful followers of Jesus can experience such lack of faith, then you and I should not ever be critical when we witness doubt in someone else, or when we ourselves question God's purpose and presence in our lives.

Old Testament Theologian, Walter Bruggemann has a wonderful descriptive paragraph about faith: We are, all of us, children of faith. We have been conceived and birthed, generated and summoned, given life by this faith and none other. Faith keeps having its way among us. We must come to terms with it. We spend our lives struggling with faith, sometimes struggling for faith, sometimes struggling against faith. Faith always has its say among us: It will not go away. Its voice is a haunting one. And in it we hear the very voice of God: majestic sovereignty, awesome holiness, passionate grace, weakness made strong. We have haunted lives filled with yearnings for what is not in hand, promises not yet filled, commands not yet obeyed, desires not yet granted, neighbors not yet loved. And because faith will not go away or be silent, we are destined to be

endlessly haunted, uneasy, restless, on the way. When I read this, having a crisis of faith is normal to a faith journey, and in these moments, we may find ourselves clinging to Jesus by a very thread.

John Wesley, our fearless founder of Methodism, struggled with faith and doubt. He once shared this with a fellow evangelist George Whitfield who wisely told Wesley, "Always preach faith; preach faith until you have it, then preach faith because you have it."

Our text this morning, from the Gospel of John opens with the statement that it is still Resurrection Sunday. We find the other disciples (minus Thomas) cowering in a house "for fear of the Jews" (v. 19). If Thomas is the one who often gets branded as the doubter, we must remember that the other disciples were equally guilty of doubt after they heard Mary Magdalene's announcement, "I have seen the Lord!" (v. 18); otherwise they would not have been huddled together in fear trying to figure out how things went wrong? It's not until the risen Jesus actually shows up that they believe and understand. Thomas isn't any different than his colleagues. It's just that he's behind in assessing the situation. (Homiletics online, 2014)

When Thomas later arrives, his colleagues tell him what they've seen, but Thomas is not convinced. He's hearing eyewitness talk from no fewer than 10 of his friends, all of whom have spent a lot of time with Jesus and certainly shouldn't have any problem identifying him. But Thomas is nobody's fool. People don't get up and walk around after they're dead and buried, so the eyewitness testimony, no matter that it's unanimous in claiming Jesus is alive, isn't enough to sway him.

But then, a week later, Thomas finds himself face to face with Jesus and invited to touch the nail prints in his hands and the wound in his side. As we know, Thomas blurts out, "My Lord and my God!" and Jesus' response almost sounds like a scolding: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." It's like he's saying, "You should have believed the eyewitness testimony, Thomas. Shame on you." (Homiletics online, 2019). It is only in this moment that Thomas recognizes he has been having a crisis of faith.

Doubt permeates the whole situation after Jesus' crucifixion and the discovery of the empty tomb. It's doubt that leads the disciples to temporarily be useless paralyzed with fear and Thomas incredulous'. How could this happen? *What did Thomas and the others forget that led them to hole up with their doubt?*

The text points to three key things that the disciples forgot to include in their faith-building project: three things that, if we don't remember them ourselves, will lead to spiritual bankruptcy and uselessness. The first one is the **Peace of Christ**. Four times in the text Jesus says, "Peace be with you." On one level, this is a conventional greeting -- a basic building block of community. But the repeated mention of it here is a reminder of something that Jesus had said to his disciples earlier: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (14:27). (Homiletics online, 2019) Jesus knew that his disciples would be under constant scrutiny and danger -- that there

would always be someone lurking on the other side of the door threatening to blow up their faith. But the peace of Jesus is grounded in the fact of his resurrection. When you and I forget the peace of Christ, we tend to become gripped by fear and doubt, and our sense of hope plummets. We need to remember that Jesus' life, death and resurrection has made a new future possible -- a future that's ready for us to move through faith in him. We don't have to live in fear because we have a savior who has guaranteed our future through an empty tomb.

The second key truth of Easter that we need to remember is the ongoing **Presence of Christ**. Jesus "breathed" on the disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Christ in their lives (v. 22). The Spirit would give them the power to do "even greater things" than Jesus had done (14:12) and provide the comfort, advocacy and peace that enabled them to carry out God's mission in the world.

When doubt and fear creep into our lives, we must rely on the witness of the Spirit to remind us that our lives matter and have purpose in Christ. It's the Spirit that enables us to be people who forgive sins, who speak boldly and who demonstrate the character of Christ (v. 23).

The third design feature that doubters like Thomas (and us) need to remember is that our faith isn't in an idea, or a concept or a principle – instead, our faith is in the **Person of Christ**. Jesus shows up in person a week later, when Thomas is present, and invites the doubtful disciple to touch his wounds. It's a touch that's only possible if Jesus is more than a concept, but a person who was "in the flesh" like us; who suffered as we suffer; who was tempted like we are tempted; who dwelt among us and gave his life for us.

As I have struggled with doubt in my Christian walk, I have always wondered, "Why has the Christian community developed such a negative attitude toward doubt?" We have been reared in a religious environment in which doubt is posed as the antithesis of faith. And this story of Thomas is often used to reinforce that lesson. But isn't the "doubt vs. faith" contrast a false issue? Is not the real enemy of faith unbelief rather than doubt? I think so. And what is more, I think that doubt has a constructive and positive role to play in the exercise of faith.

So what are we to do? We don't want to be a "Doubting Thomas," but what do we do when we are beset with unresolved questions of faith.

We, as the church, often dismiss or discount doubts and questions as the products of an immature faith. Sometimes we simply repeat the same religious platitudes that we found unsatisfying in our own struggles of faith. Sometimes in our conviction that we possess some of the answers, we act as though we have all of the answers. The three least used words in our religious vocabulary are, "I don't know." And in this feasting under the tree of knowledge, we rob faith of its humanness. (Homiletics Online, 1998)

What would happen if we were to respond to these questionings and doubts by using them as teaching moments? Here the example of Thomas can help us. We can learn from Thomas that even though we don't know where our journey may lead, it is enough that our Lord makes the

journey with us. And in those times when our faith needs to be reinforced with concrete building blocks, it is good to know that our Lord does not meet our doubts with chastisement, but with a manifestation of grace.

If we were to be truly honest with one another we would recognize that most congregations are filled with persons who hold unresolved issues of faith and belief, but there is often no safety zone within our churches where these doubts can be raised and legitimized without the questioner being made to feel like a second-class Christian. Instead we hold before them the negative image of Thomas the Doubter.

But what if we rehabilitated the reputation of Thomas as one who had the courage to admit his lack of understanding? And what if we celebrated the willingness of Thomas to express his honest doubts?

In closing I leave you with the words of Theologian Frederick Buechner – take these words and ponder them. If you tell me Christian commitment is a kind of thing that has happened to you once and for all like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery, I say, you're either pulling the wool over your own eyes or trying to pull it over mine. Every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself: "Can I believe it all again today?" No, better still, don't ask it till after you've read *The New York Times*, till after you've studied that daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day.

If your answer's always Yes, then you probably don't know what believing means. At least five times out of ten the answer should be No, because the No is as important as the Yes, maybe more so. The No is what proves you're human in case you should ever doubt it. And then, if some morning the answer happens to be really Yes, it should be a Yes that's choked with confession and tears and ... great laughter.

Do not ever discount or despair of your crises of faith. As you are faced with doubt and fear allow the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to show you and sustain you through times of darkness and despair. Always remember you are not alone. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.