

PEACE OF RESURRECTION

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

April 19, 2009

John 20:19-31

A few years ago, one of our good friends, Marie Pfarr, who was eleven-years old asked me, “Do you ever have problems believing in the resurrection and other stuff like that in the Bible?” Marie is a seeker and thankfully felt comfortable asking the tough questions of the faith. I told Marie that I did not fully understand the resurrection and many other things in the Bible and that doubts and not understanding everything are a very big part of our faith. I shared with her, “The early Christians generally assumed that no one could simply hear or read the Bible and understand it as it should be understood. They took for granted that Christianity’s truths were **NOT** self-evident in this fallen world. (April 19, 2006 edition of **The Christian Century**, Roberta Bondi)

I encouraged this bright, young woman to doubt and to question just as my seminary professors blessed my doubts and questions. I will never forget a portion of a prayer one of my favorite seminary professors prayed during the first worship service I attended for entering students. Rev. Daniel Aleshire prayed, “Lord, give us the

courage to live with the questions of faith while we search for the answers that will give integrity to our lives and meaning to our souls.”

Recently, I read a quote about faith and doubts that helpfully describes their relationship. In the book, **Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith**, Kathleen Norris says, “Faith is still a surprise to me. No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a ‘thing’ that you either have or you don’t have. I appreciate much more the wisdom of novelist, Doris Betts who asserts that ‘faith is not synonymous with certainty but rather faith is a decision to keep your eyes open.’”

I don’t know about you but I am most thankful that the stories of Thomas made it into our scriptures when the early church was assembling the Bible and fighting about what books would make it in and what books were simply not scripture material. I am thankful for the courage and honesty Thomas dares to speak about his faith. My guess is that many of us struggle with our faith intellectually, that our believing is inconsistent at best, that we struggle with doubt, that we wish we didn’t doubt so much, and that we feel a little uncomfortable, maybe even guilty, that we say things we don’t wholeheartedly believe or understand. By

detailing that reluctant disciple's doubts, the Gospel of John took the words right out of our mouths and put them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we come to believe.

Frederick Buechner said that, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith that keep it awake and moving. When it came to 'Doubting Thomas', imagination was not his long suit. He called a spade a spade. He was a realist and when something came up that he didn't believe in or couldn't understand, his questions could be pretty direct." When Jesus was bent on going to Lazarus' home, deep in enemy territory, and everyone else was trying to talk him out of it, Thomas said, "let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus sat down at the last supper table and told his friends not to be afraid, because they knew the way where he was going, it was Thomas who said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

The Episcopal preacher and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor says this about Thomas: "He was not a follower, at least not automatically. Thomas was a brave and literal-minded maverick who could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after he had convinced himself that it was the right thing. Maybe you have known someone like that—someone whose refusal to go along

with the crowd has more integrity to it than those who go along easily.”

Our passage for today tells us that Thomas was not there the first time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was crucified and resurrected. He was the only one of the eleven who was not there, which tells you something about his character. Buechner speculates that maybe Thomas didn't get as worked up into a panic as the rest of the disciples had done after Jesus was put to death. “Instead of sitting crowded together in a room with the door locked and the shades drawn, scared sick they'd be the ones to get it next, Thomas had probably gone out for a cup of coffee or just to sit in the park for a while and watch the pigeons. Anyway when Thomas finally returned and they told him what had happened, his reaction was just about what they might have expected. He said that unless Jesus came back again so he could see the nail marks himself and actually touch them, he simply couldn't believe that what they had seen was anything more than the product of wishful thinking.”

Distinguished New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown points out that the Greek is strong and emphatic, “I'll never believe that!” is more like what Thomas said. “Are you crazy, a dead man appearing here? That can't happen. It didn't happen.”

John Buchanan, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, says that rather than referring to Thomas as doubting Thomas, he prefers “honest Thomas” or “brave Thomas,” and fiercely believes there is a positive and necessary role for skepticism and doubt in much of our life. He talks about the necessary role doubting plays in science and quotes the late Lewis Thomas who said, “The story of medical science is the story of doctors courageous enough to doubt conventional wisdom. Science itself is the story of researchers who doubt that the truth is yet fully known. Copernicus, Galileo and other brave scientists who were often publicly ridiculed for their hypotheses, doubted the truth that was available to them. We need to be thankful Louis Pastier doubted that a small amount of rabies virus injected under the skin of an infected patient would be fatal.”

Buchanan also says that there is a role for doubt in religion and quotes William Placher, a theologian who teaches at Wabash College. “Placher thinks that modern men and women speak too confidently about God and reminds his students and readers that we begin with God’s mystery and otherness and that a God who is understandable and fits into human intellectual categories is not God, but our creation. Placher wants us to remember Martin Luther’s idea of the ‘hiddenness of God’ and

suggests that the honest doubter, the one who struggles with the faith and humbly acknowledges the limits of human reason—even theological reason, may be the most honestly Christian.”

The philosopher Pascal said, “I am astonished at the boldness with which people undertake to speak of God.” A seminary professor I respected often said that the three most under-used words in the religious vocabulary are, “I don’t know.”

Since I believe that doubts and not knowing are a necessary and uncomfortable part of our faith, then how do we come to believe and what is it that we need to believe? I find it interesting that when Jesus appears to the disciples the second time and Thomas is there, Jesus gives Thomas the opportunity to touch him.

“A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

After all that Thomas had demanded from Jesus, I find it most interesting that we are not told if Thomas touched Jesus or not. We are only told that Thomas' response to Jesus was, "My Lord and my God!" Maybe when it came right down to it, seeing and believing were important issues with which to struggle but they were not the whole issue for Thomas. In his pursuit of the resurrected Lord, perhaps Thomas came to believe that asking the question, "What does it mean?" is more important than "Did it really happen?" Perhaps in his very personal encounter with the Lord it was the peace Jesus sought to give him that truly made the difference for Thomas.

I am a little surprised to find that as I get older I do not receive more answers to the deepest questions of life and faith. Instead, in my everyday encounters and relationships I am forced to live with more questions and to wrestle with situations beyond my control. On a good day this is okay because I have a deep peace about the fact that Christian faith, my faith at least, is less and less about knowing and believing and being right, and more and more about loving and caring and being present with others in the highs and lows of this good and difficult life. I believe that faith is about keeping your eyes open and doing things for others and for ourselves that bring more clearly into focus the gift of God's peace in our midst.

In his book, **The Gift of Peace**, Cardinal Joseph Bernadin wrote the conclusion to his book just thirteen days before he died of pancreatic cancer on November 13, 1996. He says this about his legacy, “What I want to leave behind is a simple prayer that each of you may find what I have found—God’s special gift to us all, the gift of peace. When we are at peace, we find the freedom to be most fully who we are, even in the worst of times. We let go of what is nonessential and embrace what is essential. We empty ourselves so that God may more fully work within us and allow us to become instruments in the hands of the Lord.”

Recently, I read a book review about the new book, **Expecting Adam: A true Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic** by Martha Beck. This touching and true story is about a graduate student at Harvard who has learned more about life and faith from living with her mentally retarded son, Adam, than from working with the best and the brightest at Harvard. Martha shares this story about the peace and perspective her son has given to her.

“When Adam was three years old, I began to lose hope that he would ever communicate verbally. His inability to speak was terribly frustrating for him, and it just plain broke my heart. I worked with him for hours, doing the exercises the speech therapists had taught me, having no success whatsoever.

Sometimes Adam made random sounds that could be force-fit into words, but not with any degree of honesty. I had to face it: my son couldn't talk, not at all.

One day, after hours of unsuccessful therapy, I hit a low point. I took my children to the grocery store and offered them all bribes to keep quiet. I was too tired and discouraged to enforce discipline any other way. I told them they could each pick out a treat from the candy stand next to the checkout counter. When we got there, Katie chose a roll of Lifesavers and Lizzie, a chocolate bar. Adam, who seemed to understand everything I had said even though he couldn't speak in return, went over to a basket of red rosebuds and pulled one out.

"This is what you want?" I asked incredulously. He nodded.

"No, honey, this isn't candy," I said, putting it back and turning him toward the rows of sweets. "Don't you want candy?"

Adam shook his small head, walked back to the bucket, picked out the rose, and put it on the counter. I was baffled, but I paid for it. Adam took it gravely as the girls unwrapped their candy. He held the flower with both hands all the way home. When we got there, I

was immediately engrossed in putting away the groceries and forgot all about his strange request.

The next morning I awoke to find sunlight streaming through my bedroom window. My husband, John had already left for the day, and I could hear quiet babbling coming from Lizzie's room. As I yawned and stretched, I heard Adam's small feet padding down the hallway toward my bedroom. He appeared at the door with the rose, which he had put in a small crystal bud vase. I looked at him in surprise. I didn't realize that he knew what vases were for, let alone how to get one down from the cupboard, fill it with water, and put a flower in it.

Adam walked over to the bed and handed the rose to me. As he held it out, he said, in a clear, calm voice, "Here."

I stared at Adam, almost frightened, and he looked back at me with steady eyes, and I knew what I had known all the time: that this flesh of my flesh had a soul I could barely comprehend, that he was sorry for the pain I felt as I tried to turn him into a "normal" child, and that he loved me despite my many disabilities.

Then Adam turned around, his little blue pajamas dragging a bit on the floor, and padded out of the room."

Wherever we may be on our journey in life and whatever our current questions, struggles, expectations, desires, dreams and doubts, may we be open to the gift of peace our Lord seeks to give to us along the way that will bring integrity to our fragmented lives and meaning to our disjointed souls.

And Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Faithful God,

We give you thanks for this community of faith that affirms our individual struggles in the faith and encourages us to question and to seek your way in our everyday situations and relationships. We are thankful for the Biblical witness of Thomas and for his courage and honesty in wrestling with real issues of faith and belief. O God, you know our hearts and you know the difficulties we sometimes have believing. As you were patient and tolerant with Thomas and helped him to eventually see you more clearly and know you more fully, please be patient and tolerant with us. We pray that you would meet us as we are with our own unique imbalance of gifts, passions, annoying quirks, wounds that have never healed, hopes, dreams, and favorite sins, and give to us what we need to likewise see you more clearly and know you more fully.

We are even more thankful for the gift of peace you seek to give to us. Perhaps if we allowed more peace into our busy lives and scattered selves, we would have the courage, the honesty, and the presence of mind and soul to live with more integrity and to allow more love and compassion to flow from our work and our

relationships. Enable us to affirm our great need for peace and to embrace the gift of peace wherever we find it.

We pray on this day for the peace that passes our understanding to be a guide, a comfort, and a strength to all of our loved ones facing crises and wrestling with concerns. Give us words of comfort to say that communicate concern and love to those who feel separated from community and alone in their troubles. As we reach out to others, reminds us all of our dependence upon community, faith, and peace. Let us now pray together... AMEN.

Benediction

Let us go from this place of worship keeping our eyes wide open and doing things of faith that bring peace to our hurting world and broken selves. Let us go now with the love of God, the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, now and forevermore, Amen.