

“Rising Doubt”
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First Congregational Church Camden, Maine

John 20:19-29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he 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.’ 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!’

Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

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Reflecting on what it means to have Faith, Emily Dickinson “we both believe and disbelieve a 100 times an hour, which keeps believing nimble.”

I don’t know about the rate of 100 times an hour....but I do like her notion of how disbelieving keeps believing nimble.

“Beliefs” are something we can shelve, or box up, store in the attic, we keep them around just in case we might need them at some point.

They may move with us as we journey thru life...but they no longer move us.

In her novel, HOME, Marilynne Robinson writes, “It is possible to know the great truths without feeling the truth of them.” Another way of saying, it is possible to have beliefs without believing.

“Keeping believing nimble” is to speak of faith as something that is dynamic, alive, capable of adjustment, receptive to revelation, responsive to circumstances.

I think doubt may be part of keeping believing nimble.

The writer, Frederick Beuchner had a somewhat irreverent way of naming this:  
Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.  
They keep it awake and moving.

In the life of the Church, Any talk of the relationship between doubting and believing must include the story of Thomas.

“But Thomas...one of the 12, was not with them when Jesus Came.”

There they were in their self-quarantined fear and confusion, and Thomas was nowhere to be seen.

And then a whole week passes...Thomas has by then rejoined the Disciples when Jesus appears among them for a second time.

So where was Thomas? What was he up to?

Here is my theory. After he heard the reports from the women,...he was not going to take their word for it...he was going to see for himself.

All that first day and into the night, he is conducted his search...that went on for a whole week....who knows, maybe he even went back to Galilee where they said he was going...nothing.

Thomas had the kind of doubt that didn't let him off the hook...it even brought him back.

The poet Christian Wiman says, “you know the value of your doubt by the quality of disquiet it produces in you.”

Doubt that lacks quality...is the kind that produces a low grade anxiety but never moves you in any one direction.  
It takes the QUEST our of QUESTIONING.

Doubt that lacks quality...compels you to discount or dismiss experiences – your own or others – that intimate there is more to this life than meets the eye.

Doubt that lacks quality is passive...  
is static and self-enthralled and immobilizing.

Which, of course, raises the question:  
What is QUALITY doubt?

Wiman defines this kind of doubt as

HONEST DOUBT

or, more accurately, he says,

DEVOTIONAL DOUBT.

This form of doubt, Wiman says, is marked by three qualities:

*FIRST...Honest doubt, devotional doubt...*

**has the quality of humility** – which makes one’s attitude anything but boastful or arrogant posture/disposition...it is a recognition of limits of one’s understanding, of what one knows...

*SECOND,...Honest doubt, devotional doubt....*

**has a quality of insufficiency** – which makes it impossible to rest...it is not settled, neither is it frenetic..it remains intrigued, curious, open,...it keeps probing for more...

*THIRD...Honest doubt, devotional doubt...*

**has a quality of mystery** – which continues to tug you upward, or at least outward... even in your lowest moments...it has a sense of depth, and of wonder...

This reminds me of a line from another poet, Mary Oliver:

“Keep room in your heart for the unimaginable.”

Humility...insufficiency...mystery...

I think one could say the very same thing about believing...Believing should cultivate in us the qualities of humility, insufficiency and mystery.

The Disciples make room for him. Keep him in their company. Communities of faith are communities that nurture believing and make room for doubting. Doubt is not the enemy of believing. It is part of the ecology of believing. I am most intrigued these days with those who believe humbly and those who doubt humbly.

Believing is not static or absolute. Not once for all...all at once. There are moments of declaration – which more often than not are moments of aspiration, of devotion, of aiming, of offering.

In speaking about his faith, Elie Wiesel the Jewish author and Survivor of Auschwitz, once wrote:

*I went through many stages.*

*At times I felt that God was cruel...that God was absent.*

*The main thing I felt was that God was silent....my questioning of God goes on.*

*But even in the beginning I believed in questioning God from inside faith.*

*It is BECAUSE I BELIEVE that I am all the time questioning*

There is a turning point in this story of Thomas and his questioning. It is a dramatic turning point. It is the moment when Thomas, standing before Jesus declares "My Lord, and My God."

There is no other confession of faith quite like it in all of the New Testament.

It only comes when Thomas sees the wounds of Jesus. Did you notice that it is no less true for the rest of the disciples? A few verses before, we learn that when Jesus first appeared to the rest of the Disciples, "Jesus showed them his hands and his side" and it was only then they rejoiced...only then they recognized him.

The theologian Thomas Halick does not want us to miss the significance of this.

"I can only have the right to exclaim "My Lord, and My God" if I touch his wounds...of which our world is full."

How do we declare our faith in, our love for God whom we have not seen if we do not see Christ in the wounds of the world?

We do not come to recognize the presence of Jesus by overlooking the wounds in this world.

It's as if Jesus is saying,

"It is only when you touch human suffering and maybe only there that you realize that I am alive.."

Did you catch that last verse when Jesus talks to Thomas about us?

"You, Thomas, have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Of all the words of Jesus we have recorded in the Gospels, these only ones that are spoken directly to us – everywhere else, we are overhearing him as he speaks to those who are there with him in the room  
or walking with him on the street  
or on the seashore  
or sitting with him on a hillside  
or at table with him sharing a meal.

Here are words that he speaks beyond those who are there with him. He looks beyond them and sees us and says,

“Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Jesus seems to recognize us and casts his blessing upon us...who, some 2,000 years and 66 generations after the fact, are still trying to wrap our minds, at least our hearts, and our very lives around something that sounds too good to be true.

He sees you and me...he sees a world where death and the threat of death still loom large...where there is plenty of room for doubt to overtake.... There is much in this life that we see...things that require no faith, no nimble believing...no doubt. Suffering, evil, inhumanity, sickness, and death. These things present themselves to us. Unbidden they come.

He sees us for whom belief is more like a wrestling match more than a resting place...

So, here we are looking back out of our troubled and troubling world...and low and behold there he is looking for us...seeing us...showing himself to us, wounds and all.

calling to us to not lose heart or faith...to not let go of that flicker of faith that dances beyond the shadow of our doubts...and calls to us...

And it's in those moments of recognition, as fleeting as they maybe, that we bow our heads and our lives and give thanks...and deep down in that place beyond words...we know we are blessed.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

I want to send you away today with a sign that you can take with you...a physical sign...something you can put in your hands. It is, quite literally, the sign language for JESUS. Some of you may already know it.

You take your middle finger of your right hand and place it on the palm of your left hand and take the middle finger of your left hand and place it on the palm of your right hand.

I think Thomas would appreciate this sign. In your hands. In your life. In the wounds of this world. There Jesus is to be seen. Amen.