

Doubters Welcome Here  
Sermon on John 20:19-31  
FCC Westfield  
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Imagine yourself as one of those first disciples. Imagine you are one of those who could not stay awake in Gethsemane. Imagine you are Peter, the one who “for sure” would NEVER deny the Lord, and then went and did so three times in a row. Imagine your feelings about your own life being threatened. And imagine the guilt that may be just about at throat level, just about “up to here,” regarding your own behavior at the end of the whole crucifixion ordeal. “If only I had...” “Why didn’t I...?” “How could I have...?” Fill in the blanks. Missed opportunities. Acts of cowardice. Shameful betrayals. And now top it all off with fear for your own life. Hiding behind walls. Not knowing what to do next. [Ever feel that way?] They were not organized. They were not focused. They had no idea how to proceed. They were overwhelmed.

Then he walks through the door. “Peace be with you,” he says. No scolding. No recrimination. No demand for an explanation. All of that is washed away. Forgiven. Petty stuff. Unimportant. Trivial. Peace be with you. (It says in the UCC commentary that forgiveness is harder to talk about in church than sex or money!) What would your response have been? Another kind of overwhelm, I’m thinking. A feeling of overwhelm that shines away all our petty concerns. Feelings of awe, relief, astonishment, and joy. All this wrapped up in one amazing experience of God. Forgiveness rules. God did not die. Christ is risen. All were amazed.

Except for one guy. Thomas. One thing we mostly have overlooked is that Thomas was out and about. He was not cowering behind closed doors. He was doing errands (perhaps for the rest of the guys). Went out to buy some bread and milk, maybe some wine. Unafraid he was, so why not go for a stroll? (It’s just a theory, but a curious one.) Just as the other disciples had not “believed” when Mary came and told them that Jesus was alive (you know *women*; not rational thinkers!), Thomas was not going to jump automatically either. Thomas wanted his own experience of resurrection. Thomas did not believe right away because he was human. He was skeptical. Thomas was you and me. He wanted his own

experience of Jesus. He was no more of a doubter than the others; in fact after Jesus had appeared to them on the road to Emmaus, they once again were hiding, certainly not living as “Easter people.”

You and I want our own experience of God. We don't want to be told and then “believe” with no encounter with truth. People left the church in droves in the sixties and seventies because it just didn't feel real to them. They didn't feel loved; they felt judged. I was one of those people. I didn't just doubt. I outright rejected. I had big time doubts. I needed to strike out on my own and I did. I experimented with different religions. I learned to meditate. I had many teachers that actually showed me unconditional love and fierce integrity. And I had my own experience. I went back to read the Bible. I felt moved and enlightened in a whole new way. I needed the time out. I needed to doubt.

Sometimes choosing (and committing) requires a period of doubt and introspection, in any life situation. Because only then are you really free to choose. You're not just going through the motions. You're not a robot. You're a human, with wounds and scars and doubts and regrets and sadness, and feelings of being overwhelmed...like the disciples.

Then Jesus shows up. You might recognize him in a show of grace or forgiveness or unconditional love by someone you know or someone you don't know. You may recognize him as kindness or laughter. He may come to you in solitude or in church, on a mountain, by a river, or at the deathbed of a loved one. One thing for sure, in the midst of all this “overwhelm,” he brings the welcome respite of peace. “Peace be with you.” That's what he brings, no matter the circumstance, no matter what we've done or have not done.

If there's one thing I have learned from the Buddhist faith, it is that the mind, or belief, moves and shifts kind of like New England weather. But how we *practice* is another thing. The Methodists knew this. And their approach was to act their way into the faith. Our faith is not marked by certainty; it is deepened and solidified by everyday practice, one day at a time, with the help of those around us. The disciples were brought along by the appearance of Christ, but also by one another's company and example.

In our walk of faith we are going to have doubts. We are going to doubt Jesus; we are going to doubt ourselves and each other. But with practice, we will grow in our ability to trust God. It's like the cartoon where the little guy walks across an invisible bridge and the step becomes visible only when he takes his own step.

It is not wrong to doubt. It is healthy. It is part of our faith walk. The only thing is, don't get stuck in doubt. Don't make it a permanent home, just pass through it. Just as it is unhealthy to stay stuck in judgment of others, it can wear us down to get stuck in doubt. Stay open to God showing us something new. That is what spiritual practice is about.

The thing is: We are not sent home to be alone with our experience. We are commissioned to love the world. We are challenged to "get out there." As God so loved the world he sent his son, so Jesus loves us and sends us out to love the world back... We are commissioned to be salt and light, bread and juice, peace and justice, goodness and mercy...

Does doubting keep us from loving the world? It can, if we let it cripple us. Because doubt can turn to cynicism. And cynicism is the enemy of hope. Long time pastor of Riverside Church in NYC William Sloane Coffin said that perhaps our greatest task today is to simply think straight. That there is so much distraction and chaos and war and hurting and injustice and inequity and crassness and threat of disaster, if we do not have a heart of love, we can't think straight. "A heart full of love has a limbering effect on the mind," Sloane Coffin says. And a heart full of love is achieved by openness and practicing *as if*.

When we have our own experience of the resurrection (whatever that is to you), we can have that heart full of love. We can go out into the world and love it, be Christ for it, and have a chance to heal it. We may want to stay in our lovely homes and our beautiful churches; it feels safe here. But like Doubting Thomas (also known as the "twin"), we are called to be out there. Only when we dare to go out, as Thomas did, only then can we come home, as Thomas did. And when we see love walk through the door like Jesus did with the disciples, when we see the wounds and scars and touch them for ourselves, our response will also be, "My Lord and my God." Then we are truly home. Then we find what we have been searching for all of our lives.