

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on April 24, 2022

## THE STORY OF DOUBTING THOMAS

***Thomas said, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my fingers in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.***

**John 20:25**

Last week we focused on the core story of our faith which is the resurrection of Jesus. We affirmed the ancient cry of the church, "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!" Easter Sunday is a day of assurance that death does not get the last word. We celebrated the joy of a life-giving faith.

In our story for this week we explore the role that doubt and questioning play in our spiritual pilgrimage. One of the most notable preachers of the last forty years is the Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor. Several years ago, the cover story of Time Magazine's Easter edition was called "Finding God in the Dark." This article focused on Brown Taylor's spiritual journey. The article explored the spirituality of darkness and ways to find God in the shadows of life. One of the conclusions of Taylor's spiritual journey is found in this quote:

**For many years I thought my questions and my doubt and my sense of God's absence were all signs of my lack of faith, but now I know this is the way the life of the spirit goes.**

I think that Taylor is correct in understanding that doubt and questioning are part of the life of faith and not the enemy of faith. When we read Scripture we find many of the great figures of faith who experience doubt that often helps them grow.

The story of the empty tomb is not the only resurrection story. In the Gospels, before the Ascension, we hear of the Risen Jesus appearing to the disciples on various occasions. This morning we read the story of doubting Thomas. We read that the Risen Christ came to the disciples on the evening of Easter but Thomas was not with them. When his fellow disciples tell him they have seen Jesus alive, he does not believe them. He is not willing to take their word for it. He says only if he can see the wounds on Jesus body will he believe.

In our Old Testament lesson for today we find Elijah in the wilderness. Elijah has recently been successful in a contest on Mt. Carmel with the priests of Baal. He knew a great spiritual high as God had shamed the pagan priests. But now only a short time later, Elijah questions what God is doing.

We can go on and on naming characters from Scripture who doubted and questioned God. I believe that most of us have also experienced times of questioning and doubt. We have wondered whether it means we are losing faith. Why do we go through times of questioning when our understanding of the faith may well be challenged?

This happens for a number of reasons. One of the primary reasons our faith is challenged is that our ability or mode of thinking changes over time. Over the last hundred years there has been a significant amount of scientific study related to how people think as they mature. The work of Piaget, Eriksson and Kohlberg has focused on the psychological development of children and adults. As we physically develop and age, the way we think changes over time.

A simple example is that at birth objects only exist to an infant when it is in view. Thus if you are playing with a ball and it rolls under a chair a young baby will not look for it because when it is not in sight it does not exist. Then somewhere around two years the brain develops to the point that the object achieves permanence and the toddler will go after the ball.

James Fowler built on the work of others to produce what he calls stages of faith development. He ruminated on how changes in thinking ability are reflected in faith. Often the changes in our thinking pose a challenge to the faith, as we understood it in our previous stage. Let me share a couple of examples.

Fowler's stage three of religious development is found mostly in school children in the early grades. This is a time of concrete thinking. Children of this age are being taught the stories in the Bible and they will take them all in a literal and concrete way. There will be no ability to differentiate between an historical narrative and a parable. These children have a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe and God is almost always understood in anthropomorphic ways – God may be pictured as an old man with a white beard.

Thus when someone reaches adolescence and their mind begins to think in abstract terms it can begin to challenge the faith of their younger years. They think logically about propositions and test hypotheses. This change in thinking can cause many to question the seemingly naive faith of their elementary school years.

Most young people going through this stage of development will question God, for most have developed an anthropomorphic understanding of God. When you begin to be able to think abstractly the image of God as a judge with a beard sitting on a throne no longer makes sense.

Fowler calls this new stage the "Synthetic-conventional" faith. In this stage youth are able to think abstractly – they begin to use reason to understand and organize the world. They can begin to grasp more complex theological ideas. As in all aspects of adolescent culture, there is a tendency toward conformity.

Fowler's next stage of development takes place in young adulthood. In this stage a person moves beyond conformity to take personal responsibility for their beliefs and feelings. New understandings and concepts can threaten one's faith.

One of the great courses that I took in college was called "Jesus in Christian Thought." This course traced the church's understanding of Jesus from his birth

through the council of Chalcedon in the sixth century. In this course we read all kinds of primary texts from Greek Philosophers and the early Church leaders.

The course taught us how the early church struggled over understanding who Jesus was. The first part of the semester focused on the development of the Trinity. We learned how the church mothers and fathers fought over whether the Son was fully divine or was the Son subordinate to the Father. This controversy was finally settled at Nicea in the fourth century.

The second half of the course centered on how the divine and human met in Jesus. There were all kinds of theories of how God comes to us in Jesus. Was Jesus merely human? Did Jesus only appear to have a human body? Was Jesus half human and half divine? These were questions that divided the Christian Church until the sixth century.

I could not wait to get to class each day of the semester. It made me think that Christianity is a serious faith. It was inspiring for me to read of people who gave their lives and intellect seeking to deepen their understanding of truth. It inspired and deepened my faith.

But the very same course had the opposite affect on a friend of mine. She seemed to have believed that all the core teachings of Christianity had dropped out of heaven fully formed in the first century. The fact that human beings had to wrestle to understand God's revelation in Christ seemed to undermine her faith for a long time. She found it difficult to claim the faith as her own.

Fowler talks about another stage in faith that comes later in life. He calls the stage "conjunctive" faith. In this stage a person comes to acknowledge paradox and transcendence relating reality behind the symbols of inherited systems. What does this mean? It means learning to accept the many paradoxes of reality. We know that human beings are both made in the image of God and are sinners. We know Jesus is both fully human and fully God.

It also means growing to accept that all of our symbols and metaphors about God are not real in themselves but rather point to a reality beyond themselves. Remember God is not part of the created order. God is beyond nature. We are part of nature. The only symbols and metaphors that we can use come from creation. Thus all our words, symbols and teachings point to a reality beyond that stands behind them.

Doubt can help us to grow to deeper levels of faith. As Fred Buchner tells us **"Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."**

How do we survive these different times of testing? How do we work through the wilderness times of doubt, questioning and confusion? I believe that there are two things that can help us get through these challenges.

The first is by holding fast to core practices of the faith. This means continue to worship, pray and live in the community of the congregation.

Even when you are full of doubt,  
even when worship seems dry  
even when your prayers seem to be trapped by your ceiling  
keep participating.

Worship and prayer can help form us even when we feel we are getting nothing out of it. In fact, as our thinking changes, we usually begin to hear the words of Scripture and worship in new ways. This can help nurture our growth.

Continue the core practice of church fellowship and caring for others. Acting out the love God has for us and being part of a supportive community gives us courage to hang in there even when the faith makes no sense to us at a certain point in time.

Secondly and more importantly – when you begin to doubt and your thinking becomes confused and you do not know what to believe – focus on Jesus. Read the Gospels and focus on the life and teachings of Jesus. Be overwhelmed by his love for us. Let his promises of hope and life inspire you. In your prayers talk to Jesus and ask him to guide you and lead you to new understandings. When we read of his death on the cross, how can we refuse such a love.

Thomas refused to believe that Jesus was alive merely based on the reports of his fellow disciples. He may have believed it was just misidentification or wish fulfillment. But he did not abandon his brothers. He continued to eat and pray with them. So later the Risen Christ came to him and he believed.

Almost every follower of Jesus goes through times of experiencing doubt. These times of darkness should be seen as opportunities for growth. Barbara Brown Taylor tells us:

**As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air. Sitting deep in the heart of Organ Cave, I let this sink in: new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.**

So even when we do not understand it all, even when we have grave doubts, even when we cannot accept every teaching of the church – we can continue to pray, take part in the fellowship of the church and serve and love Jesus and our neighbors. We can trust that just as he came to doubting Thomas, the Risen Christ will reveal himself to us.