

EASTER POSTSCRIPT
1) "DEALING WITH DOUBT"

John 20: 19-29

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It had been a good life—or so he had often told himself. Not too much to complain about, at least until now. He had a blessed childhood, one that his friends seemed to envy. A close knit family, loving parents, vacation trips to the mountains—it all had unfolded as if it was a script that he himself had written. And, at the very center of it all, was a faith that was forged from a persistent presence within the community of faith. "Church" had been something that they shared together, without question or compromise. It had been a "constant" in the equation of his childhood.

His high school and college years were also blessed. They had given shape and substance to his newly emerging identity—one that was bolstered by a quiet sense of confidence and the growing conviction that he could do most anything that he put his mind to. His first job out of college only served to enhance this sense of himself. He was quickly recognized for the good gifts and sense of responsibility that he brought to his work. One promotion followed another.

In his personal life, he happened to meet the girl of his dreams where upon he proceeded to fall in love and get married. Children followed as did a nice house in the suburbs, big enough to keep his growing family comfortable. And so it had gone...all the various pieces of life's puzzle seemed to be fitting nicely into place. Any challenge or crisis that had surfaced along the way had been momentary, a brief interlude on the road to the good life—the life that he had always expected to live.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, this good life, this life that had been scripted with success and fulfillment, with love and relationship, began to come apart at the seams. His company was sold to another—one that had no particular interest in his gifts and his services. His lay-off notice had been the first shot across the bow, but there were others that followed. His perfect marriage was discovered to be not exactly perfect and there were issues and tensions that required more than a little time in the counselor's office. His children, of course, were not immune to that tension and that could be seen in their struggles in the class room.

Now, at age 43, he was experiencing a life that he was convinced he did not deserve. He had, after all, always tried to do the right thing. He had played by the rules. He had done the work. He had been responsible, loving and kind to the best of his ability and he was well known and well- loved for his leadership at his church. Now this...

What had once been a gleaming crown jewel, had become tainted and tarnished with struggle and failure. Life was no longer easy and he was no longer confident. In his darker moments, he wondered about God and about whether or not he could even believe in a God

who would allow his life to be turned upside down. If God was truly caring, truly loving, then where in the world was this God in his present circumstance of doubt and despair?

The saga of this mythical man and his struggle to come to grips with the reality of struggle and failure is one that is not unfamiliar to some of us—perhaps, most of us. In fact, it is possible that most all of us might find at least a piece of his story that we could at least, understand if not completely identify with.

We set out on this journey with the belief that if we work hard, believe the right things, play by the right rules and help others in need that life will return the favor—that we will be compensated well for our efforts. Failure is not an option, but a problem to be solved. In the confidence of our youth—perhaps arrogance would be more accurate—we are inclined to believe that there isn't anything that we can't accomplish with energy and effort.

But then, as the years begin to unfold, we encounter unexpected moments—moments when life didn't exactly pan out as we thought it would...moments when life didn't play by the rules...moments when suddenly found ourselves confronting a sense of failure or brokenness that we are convinced we did nothing to deserve. The bottom seems to drop out and we are left with questions that don't have ready made answers.

And it is in those moments of crisis—moments of disillusionment, failure and heartbreak—that we are confronted with a fundamental choice. It is the choice of how we will choose to live in the face of disappointment and struggle...the choice of how we will choose to understand God and God's role in our life when things do not go our way...the choice of whether or not the challenge we face will open the door to a new level of living or slam that door shut, limiting us to our cries of protest and the sense of what might have been.

As I read between the lines of our lesson, this morning, from the Gospel of John, I am inclined to think that Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, had reached that crisis moment. He had followed Jesus up until the crucifixion and then had scattered like everyone else, convinced that the dream had come to an inglorious end. He must have chided himself for being so naive, for allowing himself to believe that Jesus could actually pull it all off. His three year investment as a follower had ended in failure and a disappointment that was deeper than any words could possibly describe.

As he was processing all of this and adjusting to the new post crucifixion reality, he heard the stunning and somewhat unsettling news from the others that they had seen Jesus, that he had appeared to them. And quite frankly, he didn't know what to think or how to respond. It couldn't be true...or could it? "Unless I see with my own eyes," Thomas told them, "I will not believe."

Can you blame him? I don't see how anyone of us could. The world that he had known and believe in had come apart at the seams. In the crisis of the crucifixion, all of that had changed and Thomas was merely responding in the way that any logical, thoughtful person would. And yet, for this frank profession, Thomas has often been tagged throughout the

centuries since, by the taint of ridicule. **“Doubting Thomas”** is the name that has often been used to label any who chose to express their doubt.

This morning, I would like to counter this negative reputation by suggesting that far from being recognized as a “sinner” for his doubt, Thomas might well be recognized as a “saint.” It was, after all, his doubt that led to his encounter with the risen Christ and it was his doubt that made possible that timeless expression of deep and profound faith: “My Lord and my God!” Rest assured that this was not a casual expression of faith, but one that grew out of the very fiber of his being. And it was, I believe, his doubt that made this witness of faith possible.

As Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, observed, **“Doubt is not the opposite of faith; but an element of faith.”** It is, I believe, an essential element of faith in that it holds the potential to open the doors of insight, understanding and conviction that otherwise, might remain closed.

Thomas, therefore, might well serve as the patron saint of those of us who have experienced the unexpected struggles and tragedies of life; those moments when our worlds come apart at the seams and life is most decidedly, unfair. I’m wondering if you can think of any of those moments as you may have experienced them in the context of your own life. I think that it is safe to suggest that we all have them—that sooner or later, we come to the place where we are forced to acknowledge that we are broken and that we don’t know how to fix ourselves.

And it is precisely in these moments when our doubt rises and our sense of confidence in God and the fairness of life begins to fail, that we are faced with a choice that can open the door to the kind of faith, the kind of life, the kind of love, the kind of life that we have always longed for. And it is not likely that door will be opened to us unless we experience the full weight of our brokenness and failure.

The story is told of a man who found the cocoon of an Emperor Moth and took it home to observe the unfolding of its transformation. One day, a small opening appeared, and for several hours, the moth struggled, but couldn’t seem to force its body past a certain point. Believing that something was wrong, the man proceeded to take a pair of scissors and cut away some of the cocoon that seemed to be the problem. The moth emerged more easily—its body large and swollen, its wings small and shriveled.

The man waited and watched, expecting the wings to come to life, but after several hours, it was apparent that this was simply not going to happen. The moth was doomed to a short lived life without the benefit of healthy wings. Why? Simply because the man, in his good intention with the scissors, had circumvented the struggle that was necessary to the full maturation and development of the moth. The moth needed the struggle with the cocoon in order to become the beautiful creature that it was intended to be.

Thomas discovered that it was only when he entered into and faced his doubt that he could fully embrace a faith that was real and authentic, a faith that was alive and full. It was only

in his willingness to struggle with his doubt that he could grow fully into the man of deep faith that he was intended to be. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but an essential element in a faith that is fully alive.

Allow me, in conclusion, to illustrate just what this might mean in terms of our own spiritual growth as we navigate the pathway to a deeper and more meaningful faith. The challenges and crisis of life and the doubt that they often create can be—and hopefully, will be—the catalyst for our willingness to rethink our faith and to renegotiate our understanding of God.

I am amazed by the fact that some people have never really bothered to do so. They have, essentially, the same understanding of God and their faith that they had as a child or as a young person. God, to them, is still “an old man with a beard” who sits on a throne somewhere in the heavens beyond the limits of space and daily intervenes in the lives of people, moving them around on the board of life as if they were chess pieces. This is a “hands on” God who is in complete control of the universe and makes everything that happens happen.

The problem with this childlike (naive) understanding of God is that when bad things happen to good people, when life is unfair and brutally tragic, when everything begins to come apart at the seams, this picture of God no longer works. It is found to be deeply disappointing and disillusioning. That is enough to convince some that it is time to give up their faith all together, to conclude that it was nothing more than wishful thinking to begin with. They become agnostic or atheistic in their thinking.

That is, of course, one option and we see it taken all the time. But there is another option and it simply to renegotiate one’s understanding of God as a prelude to rethinking one’s faith. Our doubt and frustration with our childlike understanding of God can be the invitation we need to grow up in our faith into a new understanding of just how God is at work in our world and in our lives. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that is more exciting than the transformation that takes place in our lives when we make that choice.

My own understanding of God is so different from where it was ten years ago, let alone fifty. And I hope and pray that it will be so different from where it will be twenty years from now.

It is, I think, significant that the Gospel of John carries this Easter postscript of Thomas and his doubt. For it serves to remind us that doubt need not be an enemy and that the crisis it can create need not be feared. Doubt can be the catalyst that opens the door to a faith that is far more authentic, vital and personal than it has ever been before. It can provide the resistance and the tension that is needed in order to experience the full power of transformation—that mysterious force of God that enables us to “wing out” and fly. Amen!

