

The Second Sunday of Easter  
 April 11, 2021  
 First Lutheran Church  
 St. Joseph, MO  
 Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When we celebrated the Rite of Confirmation in the church I served for many years in Kansas City, we always heard our young people give their own statements of faith as part of the ritual. The process of writing those statements was never an easy one for our confirmands. I would start the process with them well over a month before the day of confirmation. In order to get them started, I would go through a whole list of the kinds of things they might want to address in their statements. We would review the things we had been studying together for the past two years: the creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Bible stories, their own experiences in the church ... Yet when it would come time to sit down and put pencil to paper, many of our young people would have a hard time getting started. When I asked what the problem seemed to be, the uneasy answer that came back often included the word "doubt."

"What do we do with our doubts?" they would ask. "What if we're not sure we really believe all the things that are in the Bible, the creeds, and those other things we studied?" A good question, I would tell them, and I meant it. A very good question especially if you are faced with the task of writing a statement of *faith* about things *you don't necessarily believe*.

So as a class we would talk about doubt for a while. We would talk about doubt being an unavoidable dynamic of faith. When we say we believe in God—when we say we believe in a being who is greater and essentially different than we are—and when we understand that there are certain things concerning God we know nothing about—that there is a mystery surrounding the nature of God for us—then doubt is an unavoidable part of believing in God. So, I often suggested that maybe the place our confirmands could begin their statements of faith would be to talk about their doubts. Acknowledge the doubts, admit them, and go on from there. Which was what they often would then do—and it got them going in writing their statements.

Doubt is indeed an unavoidable part of faith. But as I once again, though, hear the story of the disciple we know as Thomas, and I hear about his encounter with the resurrected Christ, it seems to me there is something more I want to say about doubt than simply that it is unavoidable. Because I find in this story of Thomas evidence that not only is doubt something that is *unavoidable*, I find it showing me that doubt can actually be *helpful*, too.

Now that may sound like a curious thing to say, that doubt can actually be a helpful thing for us. Usually, we think of doubt as the opposite of faith—which, in fact it is—and because it's the opposite of faith it's also a hindrance to faith. Doubts are the places where we can get stuck in our efforts to believe, and since we don't like being stuck, we don't like to sit in our doubts. Yet sitting in his doubt is exactly what Thomas did.

Thomas was really kind of a wet blanket to the Easter party. The other disciples had seen the risen Jesus, they're excited, they're rejoicing—and then they find Thomas. Thomas had not been with them at the first encounter when Jesus met them, and when the other disciples do catch up with Thomas, he doesn't believe what they say about their risen Lord. He got very "Missouri-ish," so to speak, with them, because basically what he said to them was "Show me." "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands," he said, "and unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

And incredibly, a week later, that's the very thing Jesus invited Thomas to do—which resulted in Thomas making a statement of faith that was more profound than what the other disciples had made. “My Lord and my God!” is what Thomas exclaimed after he finally met the resurrected Jesus. He is the only one of the twelve who ever actually called Jesus God in any of the four gospels. Peter at one point calls Jesus the *Son* of the living God, but he never just flat out calls him God. Only Thomas ever does that. In living through the doubt, Thomas came to a greater experience of faith.

Frederick Buechner once rather playfully wrote:

*Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or you are asleep. Doubt are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*

The ants in the pants of faith. Yes, doubt can be that—but doubts can also be more than just bothersome—more than simply a pest. Some doubts aren't all that troubling, but others arise at some of the most difficult times in our lives. We may doubt God's love and care for us at the death of a spouse, or at the loss of a child. We may doubt the truth of God's rule over the creation when we experience injustice, cruelty, violence or what appears to be capricious destruction. When things of immense importance to us are at stake, then we fear doubt the most, for there is a danger in doubt. Doubt may not always lead to a greater experience of faith. Sometimes it can go the other way, and doubt can lead us into an ultimate experience of despair and disbelief.

Henri Nouwen once wrote:

*Sometimes we experience a terrible dryness in our spiritual lives. We feel no desire to pray, don't experience God's presence, get bored with worship services, even think that everything we ever believed about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is little more than a childhood fairy tale.*

*Then it is most important to realize that most of these feelings and thoughts are just feelings and thoughts, and that the Spirit of God dwells beyond our feelings and thoughts. It is a great grace to be able to experience God's presence in our feelings and thoughts, but when we don't, it does not mean that God is absent. It often means that God is calling us to a greater faithfulness. It is precisely in times of spiritual dryness that we must hold on to our spiritual discipline so that we can grow into new intimacy with God.*

What I find in the gospel this morning is a special kind of hospitality given to doubt. The other disciples do not greet Thomas' skepticism by either ignoring him or asking him to leave. They stick with him. Jesus sticks with Thomas, too—inviting him to do the very things Thomas says will relieve his doubts. Together, the whole community lives through the doubt and this, I think, is crucial in determining where the doubt leads—whether to faith or to despair.

Perhaps we ought to be so hospitable to our doubts—both to our own and to each other's. Jesus' desire for us is the same as it was for Thomas—that ultimately, we do not doubt but believe—and his presence is with us now to work to this end. Peace is what the risen Christ brought to his first disciples. Peace is what Jesus seeks to bring to us. Living in our own doubts, or holding someone else in the midst of theirs, is not often a very comfortable thing. But the gospel promise is that precisely in doing this can be found the way to peace.