

Hope CRC
April 24, 2022
“Blessed is the Believer”
John 20: 19-31

We begin today with a spoiler alert. Though it is a spoiler from years ago. And I’m not talking about Spoiler Alert: Jesus rises from the dead. No, more recent than that. From 2008 in the film *Doubt*. Honestly, if you haven’t watched this movie in the 14 years since its release, I can’t imagine it will be too much of a loss if I ruin the ending. Anyway, in 2008 the movie *Doubt* starting Meryl Streep as sister Aloysius, she plays a nun at a Catholic Church in 1964 in the Bronx. There a progressive priest named Father Brendan Flynn, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, who gives a homily on doubt, noting that, like faith, it can be a unifying force. Sister Aloysius, the strict conservative principal of the church's parish school, becomes concerned when she sees a boy pull away from him in the courtyard. Her sisters are told to be alert to suspicious activity in the school. For almost 2 hours we wonder with her what are the secrets of this priest and this parish, how does the old order of things meet the new order. Some time later, sister Aloysius tells another sister James, played by Amy Adams, that Flynn has since been appointed to a more prestigious position at a larger church. She reveals that she lied about contacting a nun at Flynn's former parish, reasoning that if it were false, the ruse would not have worked. To her, his resignation is proof of his guilt. James, still believing in Flynn's innocence, is shocked by her lie, but Aloysius restates that, "In the pursuit of wrongdoing, one steps away from God," but adds that doing so comes with a price. She then breaks down, tearfully exclaiming, "I have doubts...I have such doubts!" Her tearful expression of doubt, in a way that only Meryl Streep is able to do, is reminiscent of the painfulness it involves to reveal our doubts to another person. To not know what we truly believe, and what our lack of belief means for our lives.

Meryl Streep’s painful expression of doubt reminds me of what it must have felt like to be Thomas. Thomas has small roles in the stories of the disciples and Jesus up to this point. We first meet Thomas in John 11: 16 when after Lazarus has died, Thomas encourages the disciples to go with Jesus to see his body. In this moment he is brave and an encourager of movement and trust in Jesus. He presents himself as invested in Jesus. The second time we meet him is in John 14 where Jesus has just finished his soliloquy on going to prepare a place for the disciples. And Thomas is the first disciple to speak up and say, “What? I don’t get it. I’m not good with directions Jesus, there’s no GPS yet.” Quite unlike most men asking for directions, am I right? He is willing to question. Willing to seek the answers he longs for. And still totally invested in Jesus. And so we land on John 20. Thomas had watched Jesus die. Thomas had watched the man who told him strange things about heaven and life and death, who had inspired him, who he bravely followed, who he passionately loved and cared for, die a gruesome death. Jesus was Thomas’ friend and he loved him. And he was gone. Afraid, tired, and sad Thomas went off to nurse his broken heart alone. He did not look for consolation with the other disciples. Perhaps he was tired of them and their behavior. Perhaps he was just too heartbroken to be with other people.

Sadness begins in loss. It begins in the recognition of the darkness. And it begins with a feeling of apartness. Sadness and silence can be palpable. In the face of true heartache, of real loss. There are

no words, no expressions of consolation that work. Language fails in those moments. I do a lesson on the relationship between faith and doubt with my residents at Timberline Knolls. The place where residents always latch into the discussion is on the idea that doubt itself is not so hard to live with, it's when others don't acknowledge our doubts as real or valid that the pain sets in. Just the other day, a resident told me of losing her father and her brother in a short timeframe and when she voiced her question of why, those of her church said, "Everything happens for a reason." And that was the moment she became disillusioned with the faith. Her feelings of doubt were misaligned with the thoughts and faith of others, and she could not reconcile her feelings with their statements. So she became angry at them, angry at God, and angry at herself for being unable to make the ascent to faith. Thomas was living this moment of faith in flux. He had this deep intense heartache and he goes to his friends finally, when he's ready to be with people and begin healing. And they say to him, "Don't be sad. We've seen Jesus." His heartache, just like my resident's was not seen, but was dismissed and rejected. Thomas in his heartache, in his pain, couldn't take it.

Sometimes we speak in life of head knowledge and heart knowledge. We make a separation between the two and say, one is better than the other, superior in some way. Most people when asked will say that their soul sits in their heart or their belly. The belly being a Jewish belief. Most don't see the soul in the head. Sure, the third eye may be relevant but it connects to wisdom, contemplation, insight; all mental functions. Our minds tend to think through all the emotional stuff in our lives and sort out what we believe and feel. Recently, I heard a psychologist talk about the phenomenon of "trusting your gut." This is when your intuition kicks in and people have a response as to what happens when you do or do not trust your gut. Well the psychologist framed it as, "When you feel something in your gut trust it, because usually it is representative of the phenomenon of our bodies and souls knowing something before our minds have had a chance to process it." Your soul knowing something before your mind can figure it out. Pretty cool right.

Thomas trusted his gut. It was part of his character. He knew something was wrong, he knew he was in pain and not able to be with others. So he ran from the cross, he ran from others. When he returned to them and was confronted with an idea that his grief may be misplaced, he was rightfully upset. His pain should not have been dismissed. Except, what the other disciples told him was true. They had seen Jesus. They had gotten the miracle that could lift them out of their pain and heartache. They were finally happy. In their happiness they were no longer able to connect with Thomas's sadness.

But Thomas was firm. I want proof. Faith is often described as evidence of things unseen. Due to the unseen-ness of faith it is hard. Faith often feels like work. The thing about belief and faith here is that we often describe doubt to Thomas and we make it a bad thing. For Thomas his doubt was not a bad thing. Thomas asks for a sign. Thomas asks for real proof. It's logical and real. Perhaps he is jealous as well, that his friends have seemingly overcome their pain so quickly. And he seems angry. Saying, "Unless I see the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Take that you fools! Thomas has experienced enough pain due to his friends and the loss of them. It as if he is saying, "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me." Jesus had taken his heart once and he was not about to give it up again without some proof. Thomas was not about to fall for another heartbreak. And we don't know how the disciples perceived his or his doubt. When he asked for a sign were they

like, “Oh man, here he goes again – always questioning stuff” Or were they angry with him, “OH com’on why can’t he just believe us.” Certainly whatever their response they did not reject him from their midst.

A week passes and Thomas stewes in his anger at his friends, at his God. Perhaps he was tired of hearing the disciples prattle on about Jesus being alive. After all, Thomas being pragmatic would know that if his disciple friends kept telling this little yarn about Jesus being raised from the dead they would get themselves killed as well. But all their energy regarding a risen Jesus would not quit. So they gather again presumably for a Sabbath meal in the upper room again. And Jesus appears. “Peace be with you.” And without Thomas having to say it Jesus offers immediately to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put in it my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas never said a word in that moment. Thomas asked for a sign a week ago and Jesus offers the sign willingly. The Bible never says that Thomas actually touches Jesus. Some say that Jesus’ mere presence before them was enough for Thomas. Others say, that when offered he had to have touched the side or the hands. And how different this is from what Mary experienced. Mary was told not to touch, not to hold on. And Thomas is offered everything.

Everything. Thomas’ response “My Lord and My God.” Is a statement of faith. It is the deepest expression of truth and recognition around. A real acknowledgment that Jesus is with Thomas. Jesus saw Thomas and was right there with us.

Many people grow up believing that if we doubt for even a moment, we commit a sin against God. Thomas shows that this is simply not true. For Thomas was firm in his doubt and disbelief but Jesus came to him and did not pronounce judgment upon him. Jesus not belittle Thomas or judge him. Jesus simply offers an invitation. “Come, see, touch, believe.” Jesus knew exactly what Thomas needed and when he needed it in order to believe. God is not so small that he cannot take our doubts and wanderings. And we are not so important that God is changed by our lack of faith. God is the eternal truth, we can choose to believe or not, we are all invited to the faith and grace of Jesus, the faith and grace to believe. We are not too big or small for God to love us. And in truth we only doubt things that really matter to us. So we don’t doubt that gravity exists and we don’t doubt that the earth is round. (At least we should not doubt that – thank you but no thank you to flat earthers). Because we honestly don’t care that much. We doubt whether certain people love us, because we want and deserve love. We doubt ourselves and our abilities to succeed and accomplish things because we want achievement so badly. We doubt God, because the answers matter. Because we want to know how and why things happen in our life. Because we care. Thomas, doubted, because it mattered. He grieved, the ultimate expression of love, and he needed to know the truth. He needed to know for himself if Jesus lived because he needed Jesus in his life. We are not so far removed from Thomas. We doubt our faith because it matters. Because our love and our lives define us and we want to know the truth, we want answers and healing and hope.

Some of us revere Thomas. He asked to see proof and he got that opportunity. We ourselves don’t seem to be so lucky. We hold little hope of having a similar experience as Thomas, since we are so far removed from the immediacy of Jesus’ death and resurrection. But Jesus didn’t see this as so. Jesus calls us “blessed.” Blessed are you who believe and do not get the opportunity to touch the side of Jesus. Blessed are you who trust even without sight. The leap of faith that it takes to believe without

sight or touch or sound cannot be discounted. It is work. But it is the best work that we will ever do. To hold onto faith in the midst of doubts, takes strength and courage. Our doubts often become our friends because they protect us, they tell us “Oh no, we’ve seen that before, look away.” Or “oh no, that’s no good, it wasn’t good before, no way it will be good this time.” We know these doubts and uncertainties about ourselves so intimately. Faith can seem like a dream, like a reality that’s not meant for us or about us. In many ways our doubts are about trusting feeling over belief. As in the case of Thomas, he felt hurt and he trusted and believed that. So much so that he could not believe his friends. He could not trust their evidence, as expressed in their belief.

One of the few assumptions that the Bible makes, regardless of time and place is that God is real, God exists. It’s not so much about does God exist? But rather about what does the existence of God mean for people? For nature? For the people who believe? Jewish and Christian. So when Thomas expresses his doubt and says he wants proof. He stands in a long tradition of psalmists and other thinkers who say, “God is real, no doubt there. But where is God? When and where can I see him?” For Thomas he thought he knew God through Jesus. With the death of Jesus his world turns and he questions whether he really knew God through Jesus, or what he knew of God through Jesus. His ultimate question is, “Where is God in my suffering?”

Jesus revealed the answer, which of course has relevance to our lives today. Jesus is right there in our sufferings. Jesus doesn’t even need us to repeat our requests for signs and deliverance from our thoughts. Jesus knows it already. God knows it already. And what does Jesus ask of us in return? Nothing. To stand in awe of what God has done and continues to do. We do not earn or lose the love of God. Thomas begins with an act of faith by saying, “My Lord and my God.” So it is that we seek with our own hearts to respond the same.

Doubt is not the end of our faith. Just like death is not the end of the story. The doubts may plague us for sure and cause us to cry out in pain and disbelief to God but they do not separate ourselves from God. For God wants to meet us in our doubts and open the door to the new world of life and hope that awaits, when Jesus reveals truth to our hearts. This Sunday I invite you to have a little doubt to make a little room for Jesus in your hearts and make a little room for that space to be filled. Today we can take comfort in Thomas and his faith. Though he doubted, he came to believe. He knew the resurrection to be true and it changed his life. Today we are the product of his faith. Blessed are those who believe in spite of the passage of time, in spite of principalities and powers, in spite of heartache, in spite of ourselves. Blessed is the Lord who reveals God to us and God’s love for us through our doubts and discouragements and seeks to welcome us into faith. Therefore let us welcome the Lord to new life with the words, “My Lord and my God.” Amen.