

Sunday April 28, 2019
Year C, Easter 2
John 20:19-31
“Faithful Doubt”
© Rev. Elise Feltrin
St. Andrews United Church, Bayfield

John 20:19-31 Good News Translation

It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them.

“Peace be with you,” he said. After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!”

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus said to him, “Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!”

In his disciples' presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life.

Who doesn't know a thing or two about Doubt?

Even the most confident and self-assured among us, are susceptible to the unexpected and often insidious way in which Doubt can creep into our thoughts, plaguing us with sudden uncertainty, causing us to question our motives, second guess our choices.

Doubt can breed insecurity, create suspicion, erode self-confidence.

Doubt has a habit of sneaking up on us.

Mine often arrives in the middle of the night...insinuating itself into my dreams, or tricking me into wakefulness so that I can wrestle with it for hours in the silence and darkness.

In the months leading up to my sabbatical, Doubt was a frequent visitor.

In the brightness of daylight, I busily planned my trip – booking things online, discovering all kinds of interesting places to go and exciting things to do. I made reservations, I organized details, I researched options and made decisions with confidence.

But later, lying in bed, Doubt would quietly nudge me awake and whisper in my ear
“What the heck do you think you’re doing?”
Doubt would cast apprehension on my abilities and stir up my trepidations – casually
inquiring “And just who the heck do you think you are?”
Doubt would creatively paint vivid pictures in my mind of what *might* happen – the
accidents and disasters just waiting to befall me.....
or Doubt would metaphorically show up in my dreams – as the dangerously gaping hole
that suddenly appeared in my hiking path; as the too-small door through which I was
trying to squeeze.

Perhaps Doubt visited St. Andrews too during this time of mutual sabbatical rest.
Nonchalantly raising questions like “Can we afford this?”
“Why are we doing this?”
“What will happen to us?” and the endless “What ifs....?”
“What if.....? What if.....? What if....?” You can fill in the blank.

And unfortunately, Doubt didn’t remain behind when I left for my trip....Doubt had no
qualms about sneaking into my carefully packed suitcase and showed up proudly
brandishing skepticism that made me question.... whether the shuttle driver really was
going to pick me up at 7 am; whether my online payments had really been properly
credited, whether google maps could really be trusted to find my way through these
complicated foreign streets.

I almost missed out on a fabulous meal of the freshest grilled tuna I’ve ever tasted,
because Doubt tried to convince me that the ramshackle hut on the beach couldn’t
possibly be a decent restaurant.
Doubt also came close to discouraging me from climbing a few challenging, mud-slicked
mountain trails that led to spectacular panoramic views.
Doubt sat on my shoulder and mocked me when I showed up on my first day of Spanish
School – “Ha!” Doubt laughed, gleefully pointing out that I was the oldest one there....
“You? A Spanish student? Do you really think you belong here?”

Doubt is very real, and very powerful.

Unchecked, Doubt can consume and paralyze us.
It can overtake our minds and impede our lives.
And doubt can interfere with our belief;
By preventing us from believing in ourselves.
Doubt is cynical.
Doubt, nags.
Doubt, tempts us to say ‘no.’
But I learned in my travels, how many wonderful experiences I would have missed, if I
had surrendered to Doubt.
If I had not carefully and consciously chosen instead, to say ‘Yes!’

We cannot eliminate Doubt. It seems to have a tenacious life of its own – rearing its head and showing up in unwanted places.

But we can pry ourselves from its destructive grasp.

How might we be-friend Doubt?

By recognizing it, naming it, and then, resolving it?

Or perhaps by transforming it into wonder?

Our poor friend from today's Gospel story, the disciple Thomas, always gets a bad rap, being labelled almost disdainfully as 'Doubting Thomas.'

But maybe a little Doubt, is not always a bad thing, particularly where faith is concerned.

A little Doubt, might be the sign of interest and curiosity that prods us into seeking and searching for deeper meaning. Into reaching out to touch those unappealing sore spots.

A little Doubt might keep our faith alive and growing rather than sinking into stagnation, or complacency, or even worse, the arrogance of certainty.

A little Doubt, might be just the fertile soil, into which a vibrant faith cautiously takes root....and tender New Life begins to flourish.

Maybe as a church, we need to create more space to honour Doubt – to allow people to bring their worries, their concerns....to share their anxieties, to unburden their insecurities – to seek relief from their guilt of disbelief.

And for us, as a faithful community, to accept them all without judgment, as Jesus still welcomed and accepted Thomas in his doubting...

I've always thought that the best slogan for a church is: "*Come Have All Your Answers Questioned*" because of all places, Church should be the place that allows for the deep, life-changing and un-answerable questions – a place where seekers can sit together peacefully in the unknowing.

Because just as there is room in our bible for Doubt, there is room in our churches – Doubt arises throughout our scripture stories, Doubt sits among us in the pews, Doubt often stands at the pulpit.

I wonder what Doubt is whispering in your ear in these post-Easter days?

About your own uncertainties...about your life....about your faith.

And I wonder how you might embrace rather than try to ignore or diminish that Doubt.

How you might explore what Doubt is saying with wonder and curiosity, rather than with fear?

Here, with the Risen Christ, there is room for Doubt; there is room for uncertainty; there is room for disbelief.

And always, always, but especially as we are reminded in these post-Easter days of spring, there is room for growth, there is room for transformation, and there is space for the emergence of New Life and new beginnings.

Faith, is not about 'proof' or having all the answers – but faith is about having the courage and the tenacity, to acknowledge the presence of Doubt, to listen to Doubt's questions – and then, with hope, to continue on our lifelong journey of seeking meaning, seeking purpose, and seeking God's grace...

Alleluia and Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

God of the empty tomb,
we live in a scientific age that demands proof and hard evidence.
And yet we continue to gather faithfully in your age-old & nebulous Mystery.
We bring our doubts, our fears, our unknowing – and listen to the incredible, often
implausible story of your abiding Love.
We hesitantly, expectantly?... seek healing and await miracles,
Even as we join in generations of those who anxiously wondered, is it True? Is it
possible?
God, we ask your blessing on our Doubt.
Transform it to Wonder.
Inspire it with Curiosity and truth-seeking.
Let it stir up in us a desire to search and to grow,
To leave behind our certainties and our arrogance;
Our restrictive black-and-white understanding of the world;
Help us to notice the blurring of boundaries and to embrace the ambiguity of life....that
we might be more open to those who are different, and to experiences that are not what
we have come to expect....and in these things, we might ourselves be transformed.
God of New Life, we ask you bless those who bravely bring Doubt to the forefront – and
yet have their stories questioned. Those who divulge stories of abuse or assault and are
humiliated rather than believed; those who expose injustice or corruption, and are then
threatened into silence.
On this day of remembering those workers killed on the job, we remember the dead,
and pray for companies, factories and institutions to listen to those who raise concerns
about safety in the workplace.
We also lift in prayer those recently killed or attacked while at peaceful worship – in Sri
Lanka, in California – may the faithful continue to feel free to gather, finding strength
and encouragement in community.
And as many in our world continue to doubt the reality of climate change – we raise in
prayer those effected by disastrous and unexpected cyclones, typhoons and rising
floodwaters.
May the world join together in reaching out a helping hand to those in most dire need.
In the silence of our hearts, gracious God, we name before you our deepest doubts and
concerns.....
Bless us even as we raise our questions....and continue to journey with us in our
seeking....
With trust and hope we pray in words taught us by the Risen Christ....Our father, who
art in heaven.....