

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Portions of John 20 *I Doubt It*

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“Every morning is Easter Morning from now on, every day’s resurrection day the past is over and gone!” It’s just one of my very favorite songs. Thank you for singing it with me on Easter. I love it, not just because it’s got a jazzy little way about it that fills me with joy and fond memories of my childhood minister Gary Hodges who sang it like his life depended on it, but also because the words are words I need to be reminded of throughout the course of the year, not just once on one Sunday morning in the spring.

It seems like every day presents a moment or two, or three or twenty-eight, during which I desperately need reminders that life conquers death, love triumphs over indifference, and hope reigns—even in the midst of fear, doubt, and unknowing. The new life and life everlasting that are ours because of Christ’s resurrection are worthy of being confirmed and celebrated every day, not just on the first Sunday after the Full Moon that falls on or after March 21 and if that Full Moon is on a Sunday, is celebrated the following Sunday that year. That, my friends, is how the date of Easter is determined.

And while Easter 2019 was nearly a month ago already, we didn’t have time on that joyous morning to talk about what happened after the women found the tomb empty. News of the events of the morning spread quickly and I imagine the room where the disciples were gathered later in the day was absolutely humming with excitement.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the religious leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As God has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that the Risen Christ breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

And they all heard him and they saw him and they were overjoyed.

Except Thomas because Thomas wasn’t there. By the time Thomas returned, Jesus was gone. When Thomas heard what had happened in his absence he declared, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

And then . . .

A week later Jesus’ disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

And so it is that we have the saying “Doubting Thomas.” Usually it’s said like it’s a bad thing. But is it? Is doubt really such a bad thing? It seems like the better part of wisdom may be to follow the example of Thomas, to want to see, experience, and witness something for ourselves—especially something as outrageous as a friend coming back to life after he’d been dead for three days.

Indeed, perhaps it would be constructive if the church would stop condemning doubt and those who experience it and begin to understand that, far from being a stumbling block on the faith journey, doubt can actually help us to grow and mature in our faith, both as individuals, and as a community.

Author Anne LaMott writes “the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” When certain of something, one does not need faith. Fifteenth century French author and politician Michel de Montaigne suggests that “Certainty is vastly overrated and is frequently dangerous, especially when claimed in matters that are far beyond the reach of human capacities.”¹ His sentiments echo the words of the Lord found in the writings of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. (Is. 55:8)

As this is the case, how can any one of us, or group of us, or denomination of us, or cult of us, or political action committee of us, claim to have the corner on the truth about God? How can any one of us claim, with great conviction, to know all of the mysteries of our amazing faith when God’s own self tells us that is simply not true? It would be a laughable proposition except that the violence done in the name of God, or by those purporting to know the will of God, is absolutely heinous and vile.

And so it is that in the face of such immense mystery that we might, at times, or some of the time, or even most of the time have some doubts. How could we not when attempting to engage a God whose church name tag would read “I Am Who I Am.” I mean, where would you even put a name tag like that in the rack in the Narthex? Under “I” for I? Under “A” for am? Under “G” for God? In the face of one of the greatest questions in the universe, how could it possibly be wrong to have some doubts?

Indeed, it was in my moment of greatest doubt and deepest anguish, a shadowed night of my soul illuminated only by the night-time lighting of the hallway of the psych ward of Munson Hospital, when my doubts about God, for the first time in my life, outweighed my convictions about God. I stared at my reflection in the window, panicked by the prospect that there really was no God.

After all, how could there be? The world was tearing apart in the wake of September 11 and I was being torn apart by severe depression and anxiety that had stolen my joy and almost my life. In such a state as that, I was having a hard time retaining even the slightest grip on my faith. Certainly I had done nothing to deserve the misery I was experiencing, certainly no God in which I believed would ever wish such a thing upon their own child. A blanket of doubt and dread draped itself over my soul and, had you even tried to hum a line of my beloved “Every morning is Easter morning” to me on that night, I would have tried to punch you in the throat.

I sat on that bed, wrapped tightly in a blanket to protect me from the cold air blasting through Munson’s air conditioning system, rocking back and forth in despair. I looked up when there was a light knocking on the doorframe. A small, thin woman with dark hair and skin many shades darker than my own introduced herself as the nurse on duty that night. She seemed a bit sheepish as she pulled something out of her pocket. I was kind of hoping it would be one of the pills they sometimes gave me to help me sleep but it wasn’t. It was a little laminated card with a picture on the front and words on the back. She spoke quietly saying, “I know I’m not supposed to do this but I saw on your chart that you’re a minister. I’m a Eucharistic minister for my church and I give these cards to the people I visit. I thought maybe it might help you.”

I don’t know which saint’s picture was on that card or what the prayer was on the back. The card didn’t help me. But what I do know, as much as I know anything, is that that nurse was the Risen Christ to me in that moment. I didn’t see her again that night. Indeed, when I asked the name of the night nurse with the dark hair, the nurse in the morning didn’t seem to know what I was talking about. Now granted, I wasn’t exactly in my right mind while in the psych ward, but friends, I am telling you, that that woman—whether a figment of my imagination or a long-term, real-life, certified nurse at Munson—that woman’s presence in my room that night—the light of God shining through her into the midst of the despair and doubts—that was my moment—perhaps a moment like Thomas had—when Christ invited him to place his fingers in the holes in his hand and the slit in his side. In that moment my voice joined with Thomas’ and the chorus of voices of doubters, skeptics, scholars, and wonderers who have, throughout the centuries exclaimed, “My Lord and My God.”

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freelancechristianity/why-doubt-is-my-favorite-virtue/>

Christ did not leave me to languish in my despair. Nor did Christ refuse to let Thomas touch him just because he had some doubts. Indeed, perhaps it's in our moments of greatest doubt, when we lack certainty and are listening desperately for the still, small voice of God, that we are most likely to recognize the Risen Christ in our midst.

That experience hasn't kept me from having my fair share of doubts since then. But now, when the doubts come, I'm more likely to start listening more carefully, open my eyes a little wider, and trust that the doubt will lead me to new insights, new people, and new opportunities to lean into the mystery that is my Lord and my God.

And so it is that still I sing, sometimes with great conviction, sometimes to drown out the doubts, and always like my life is depending on it, "Every morning is Easter morning from now on. Every day's resurrection day the past is over and gone. Daily news is so bad it seems the Good News seldom gets heard. Get it straight from the Easter people God's in charge, spread the word."

Even when we doubt, despair, and wonder, I have no doubt that God's still in charge. Thanks be to God.