

## LATE TO THE PARTY

Sermon preached by The Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

April 11, 2010

Scripture: John 20:19-31

“What I’d miss?” he asked the other disciples. “What I’d miss?” he pleaded with them. Poor Thomas, late to the party, wondering what the commotion was all about. He knew something important had taken place in his absence, and now he was stuck on the outside, looking in. Who of us hasn’t been there before? We’ve all been late to the party, at one time or another, missing something important. *The college student with the broken alarm clock on the morning when the professor shares details about the final exam. The son stuck in traffic, late for the surgeon’s consultation on his dad’s upcoming surgery. The new associate, lost in a maze of cubicles, late for the first staff meeting.* The feeling of being left out is acute, and the prying for knowledge excruciating.

We don’t know why Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples behind those locked doors; John doesn’t tell us. We only know that he missed seeing Jesus that first time, raised from the dead, appearing and standing bodily in front of the apostles, greeting them with peace, showing them the marks in his hands and his side. When they finally tell Thomas that they have seen the Lord, he is understandably suspicious. What the disciples are telling him is completely improbable, despite the things Jesus had said before he died; despite the words of Mary Magdalene running through his head, “I have seen the Lord!”

Thomas may have wondered if the disciples were reproving him for having missed their last gathering, testing him by offering this far-fetched and tantalizing account of Jesus. Thomas had always been one of the most faithful disciples, so devoted to Jesus that in the passion of a previous encounter, he cried out, “Let us also go [with Jesus], that we may die with him.” Now, alone in an instant, Thomas balked, and Thomas doubted. Thomas stood his ground, hands crossed in front of his chest. “Not until I see the marks will I believe.”

Everyone’s nerves were fraught that day, coming at the end of one the longest weeks in human history. To say that the last few days for the followers of Jesus had been difficult would be to say that Mount Everest is a reasonably tall mountain, or Michael Phelps a decent swimmer. The last week had been brutal, and the apostles were exhausted, heartbroken, confused, and terrified. They kept the doors locked, huddled around one another, fearful of the religious authorities, fearful of the governing authorities, wondering if they would be the next to hang upon the dreadful cross. They swapped stories, telling and retelling their own versions of the events as they transpired, hoping to make sense of it all. Snapshots swirled- drowsy-eyed in the garden; the sound of the cock crowing three times; the crowds shouting “Crucify him! Crucify him!”; Jesus’ body, broken and limp upon the cross; the shrouded body; the empty tomb; and finally, Mary Magdalene’s surprising and cryptic message, “I have seen the Lord!”

The Gospel writer, in choosing which details to highlight, shares with us Thomas’ doubting, word for word, as if he were the only one questioning the appearance of the risen

Christ, but we don't have a clue how the other disciples responded to Jesus when he first entered the locked room. There was definitely no nonchalance; no shoulder shrugs as if it were the most natural, expected thing in the world. It must have been gape-mouthed disbelief that Jesus stood among them, dumbfounded wonder when he greeted them, "Peace be with you," opening his hands for them to see the marks. Only then, in the narrative we have, do the disciples rejoice.

Thomas gets a bad rap for wanting what the disciples already received, physical evidence that the impossible was possible, that deep grief could be overcome by inexpressible joy, that death no longer had the final word. Poor Thomas has been branded by history and tradition as the scapegoat for doubt, as if doubt were an incurable illness, an unforgiveable curse. The closer truth is that one of Thomas' great virtues is the very fact that he absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not yet believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas: he would never still his doubts by pretending they did not exist.<sup>1</sup>

To be late to the party was the disciples' predicament, and it is the human predicament. We grasp what we can, always aware that something slips through the cracks of our understanding, especially when it fails to meet our standards for logic and reasonableness. Our minds and hearts can sometimes be stiff, lacking a quality of limberness and flexibility, creaking when situations require bending. We are in good company, then, with Thomas and so many of our biblical ancestors who found themselves 'late to the party,' as it were, when it came to God's action in the world. Abraham and Sarah laughed and rolled their eyes in disbelief when God promised them a son in their old age. They doubted God's power to accomplish the impossible in their own lives, remaining unconvinced until the signs of Sarah's pregnancy became too obvious to ignore.

Jacob wrestled the angel of God to the ground, unconvinced of the divine's presence and action in his life. The prophet Jeremiah refused to let God off the hook about the age old question, "Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?" Jonah fled from God, doubting the wisdom of God's plan for him, before being swallowed by the whale.

The Gospel of John alone is littered with stories of Jesus' followers in the throes of their own doubts- the disciples scratch their heads at Jesus when he tells them to feed thousands with five loaves and two fish; Mary and Martha accuse Jesus of abandonment when he does not reach their brother Lazarus before his death; Peter's doubts are so strong that he publicly denies Jesus three times on the eve of his crucifixion. The Bible contains egregious acts of doubt and disbelief from some of our most cherished scriptural characters. If we removed all instances of doubt from Scripture, we would be left with a Bible hardly longer than a graphic novel and without the fully formed models of faithfulness that we rely upon to guide us.

We empathize with Thomas, and all the other biblical doubters, because their questions are our questions: How can life overcome death? How can the body be resurrected? How can grief be transformed to joy? According to the Rev. William Kolb,

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. William A. Kolb. Is Doubt Always a Bad Thing? <http://www.explorefaith.org/Homily04.11.99.html>.

*When you think of it, to believe the Gospel is to believe something fantastic, as in a fantasy. Of all the people you have known who have died, not one, I daresay, has risen from the dead, physically. Yet we are to believe that Jesus rose physically from the grave, from death to physical life. We would like to believe, we yearn to believe, but it is clearly understandable that we might have a doubt or two, perhaps until we see and experience evidence of resurrection in our own lives, or in the lives of those around us.<sup>2</sup>*

And this is, I believe, surprising and yet not unexpected, good news- for God will not cease in reaching out to us, no matter how doubtful or suspicious or simply confused we are in the face of the Great Mystery. God does not turn us away at the door when we show up late, presenting our doubts in heavy hands. God welcomes us, invites us to take a look for ourselves. John's story of Thomas' faith is our proof that this is so. It is a story of hope and promise, not judgment and reprimand. It stands as a pledge and promise to later generations that they, too, will experience the grace of God in Jesus.

Thomas is our guide, modeling for us a discipleship that is not based upon blind faith in the impossible, but a discipleship that embraces doubt as the energy of inquiry. Thomas reminds us that doubt is not anathema to faith, but a crucial and sincere part of true belief.

Doubt agitates the tightly-packed soil of our reality, creating space for the roots of faith to grow deeper. Believing lightly or unthinkingly creates a shallow faith, situated tenuously on the surface, subject to the winds that whip and the rain that pelts. Doubt is instrumental to our faith, complements faith, energizes it, and gives it both nuance and depth.

Thomas, the Doubter, is not deserving of our pity, or our condemnation. He is an ambassador of God's grace, a messenger of the Good News, a companion in our Easter celebration. The Gospel writer shares the person and story of Thomas specifically for us, the community of believers in the generations after the historical events of Jesus' life. We, who can not touch and see- we who must believe without seeing. Our faith will be based not on what we have seen with our own eyes but by what we hear. Jesus is really talking to us when he says to Thomas the words that Eugene Peterson translates in *The Message* as, "Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

Even better blessings. That is the promise to you and me this morning, a week after Easter, back to life as usual.

The time just after Easter was not just overwhelming for the disciples in that locked room. The time just after Easter can feel overwhelming for us as well. We receive the Good News that Christ is Risen, Alleluia! - but our days begin and end with the same regularity, the same doubts and vulnerabilities and grief. We desire so much to live as resurrection people, fully convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not even death. And on days we do, falling asleep peacefully at night with the sure knowledge of God's presence in our lives. But the doubts sneak back, and we find ourselves longing for just a little proof,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

something tangible to hold on to, something round and smooth to stick in our pocket, to carry along with us when the ride gets bumpy.

The Rev. Katie Huey offers us comforting words, for moments like these:

*Whatever makes us doubt this morning, God comes to us in the midst of our skepticism and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, 'Peace be with you.' Whatever hunger and need we feel deep in our souls, God calls us to the table, feeds us well, and sends us out into the world to be justice and peace, salt and light, hope for the world. We can do it, if we keep our eyes open, our minds limber, and our hearts soft and willing to love, for we ourselves have been overwhelmed by the love of God.<sup>3</sup>*

At this church, visitors interested in becoming members or learning more about the Christian endeavor are invited to attend our Inquirers' Classes. Saying it is a mouthful, but the name reflects the purpose, and our own understanding of faith's activity- it is for asking questions, for investigating and examining all that we profess to believe, for searching under mossy rocks and digging in wet sand like curious explorers in search of new truths. As faithful inquirers, we carry butterfly nets, glass jars, and netted bags, to carry with us our discoveries, our curios, the ornaments of our particular, unique encounters with God. Our personal collections are vast, one-of-a-kind, physical proof of our searching and wrestling, the outcome of our shameless and honest curiosity.

This Eastertide season celebrates our inquiries, lifts us from our doubts, and invites us into new life. For God knows us and receives us as we are. If we come to God in honesty, carrying our burdens, our doubts, our disbelief, God will transform them. God raised Jesus from the dead; God can raise us from our skepticism. Hallelujah!

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Huey. *SAMUEL: Scripture and Mission*, a UCC Electronic Library. Easter 2, April 11, 2010. <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/april-11-2010.html>.