

Great Faith Assumes Great Doubt John 20:19-31 Rev Judy Bagley-Bonner

Today's scripture from the Gospel of John, the passage we have come to think of as the story of "doubting Thomas" is one of my favorites.

We missed it this year in our lectionary rotation because it came up the week we were at the river, so I decided to go back and grab it. You see, the story especially speaks to me because I, too, am by nature, a doubting Thomas. It's part of the reason that I am UCC- I do not have to check my brain at the door, and I am allowed to have doubts. Indeed, we take comfort in the words of a Zen master who said, "great faith assumes great doubt." I remember when it all started. When I was very young, I attended Catholic School, and I believed in God without question. But I remember the day my critical thinking kicked in, and I began to struggle with what would become my life-long companion, doubt. I think I was in about the sixth grade. I was a student at St. Joan of Arc elementary school, in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, where my mother was a teacher. I went to her classroom after school to wait for her before we would drive home. I remember looking at one of the bulletin boards with pictures of Jesus on it, and suddenly, for the first time, thinking, "how do they know He looked like that?" from there it quickly went to, "how do they know he said or did anything they say he said or did?" and finally, "what if it was all just a huge exaggeration based on what people wanted to believe?"

And I have to tell you honestly, that pretty much from that day on, faith has not come easily for me. Once my "critical thinking mode" kicked in, it kicked in in a big way. I have always been somewhat like Thomas, needing at least some modicum of logic and reason in my faith life. I suppose it was that need that drove me to go to seminary a decade or so later. And what I have learned since then is that, while in the end, there is a large element of

just having to take the leap, a sense in which the faith cannot ultimately, be proven...still, there are some arguments, some lines of thought, that have helped me come to at least a livable truce with my tendency towards doubt,

And so I share those with you this morning, as one "Doubting Thomas" who has found enough evidence, not to be certain every minute, but to cast my lot on the side of faith, & to stay the course even when doubts come in.

The first argument that really spoke to me begins with the observation that as humans, we appear to be innately "hard wired" with a hunger for eternity. At a very basic, existential level, we seem to be built such that we cannot really, experientially comprehend the idea of our own non-existence. Theologian Paul Tillich calls this "the inability of being to contemplate non-being". I know we can theoretically consider a future for the world for after we have died, but at a core level, we seem unable to wrap our mind around what it will be like for us, not to exist. This gets expressed in all kinds of ways. We say things like "if I die, I want thus and such at my funeral" as if there is some question in the matter? Deep down, at a raw, emotional level, we believe death happens to the other guy, but not to us. And even if we do work through that innate denial somehow, it still bothers the heck out of us. There is something hard wired into every one of us that longs for eternal life, that would like, more than anything, to skip the great unknown of dying, and live forever. And this survival instinct, this hunger for eternity is a strong and compelling force. Well, here is the thing: theologian CS Lewis says that just as hunger implies that there IS such a thing as food, just as thirst is the best argument for the existence of water, so this passion for immortality is itself the strongest argument that there must be some sort of satisfaction for it. Why would we be hard wired to long for eternal life if there weren't some satisfaction

for that longing? And you can't just dismiss it by calling it the survival instinct, either. Simply naming a thing does not explain it away. If this existence were all there is, why would we be haunted by intimations of more? Why would we have those unexplained longings, those vague experiences and intuitions that point to a mystery that is so much larger? There seems to be a wider universe out there that occasionally bleeds through. And not only is it "out there" but also inside each one of us, with longings and hungerings for meaning and purpose and eternity. If there were no satisfaction for that hunger, why would we have, wired into us at the most basic level, the hunger in the first place?

A second argument is related. In addition to being hard wired with a hunger for eternity, we also seem to be hard wired with a hunger for fairness. From our earliest experience in life, as toddlers arguing over the way mom cuts the cake for me and for my brother, we have a powerfully innate sense that things should be fair. And yet, as we all know because we have heard it a million times from our parents, "life is NOT fair!" Indeed, it is true that if this existence as we know it, is ALL there is, then life is so inherently unfair as to be, frankly, obscene. Unless there is some restoration at the end, how do we make any sense of the fact that some people are born smart and capable and privileged, while others are born into the chronic struggle of mental, emotional or physical disability...or abusive families or random suffering. If "this is all there is" how do we begin to square our innate hunger for justice with the fact that some babies get born into loving families, and others into hate based genocide in Syria or Darfur or Nazi Germany or other settings of unspeakable terror and suffering. It seems to me that if there were no sense of reconciliation of these inequities, no healing of this immensely broken system at the end,

then we shouldn't have innately bred into us, such a hunger for that healing, such a passion for justice which causes us to work for justice now, to be sure, but also to trust that God will bring an ultimate manifestation of the Kingdom at the close of history.

Finally, thirdly, we seem to have an innate hunger for wholeness within us individually. We have within us an innate resiliency that keeps us from just giving up when we are down. It is that thing that makes us get up when we fall and keep trying, even if we have fallen over and over. There seems to be some kinds of life force that keeps pushing us on, sort of like our immune system, a force for healing and wholeness that keeps nagging at us to continue the struggle, to keep trying to bring some kind of creative good out of pain or struggle. Scott Peck calls this "grace" and he means it not so much in the traditional, religious sense, but as the force that keeps pushing the universe, and each of us individually, forward...into something better, higher, and more whole. This innate hunger for wholeness, again, is itself an argument that there is more wholeness to be achieved; that something wants us to keep on keeping on; that we are, in this life, undergoing a great, life-long process of spiritual transformation and growth into a better, higher version of ourselves.

We have hardwired into us, these three longings: the longing for eternity, the longing for justice and fairness, and the longing for personal and universal transformation into wholeness. If there were not satisfaction for these longings, then it seems to me that we shouldn't have the passion for them so innately built into us in the first place. And if they are innately built into us, and there is not satisfaction for them, then that reveals a universe so cynical and somehow so contemptuous of our vulnerability, that one would about be forced to conclude there is a malevolent force that

designed it all...& there, you've come to faith, albeit faith in dark designer, in any case.

No, the hunger for each of these things is itself a strong argument that there must exist, somehow, some way, a satisfaction for those hungers. And for me, that satisfaction, that object of my longing, is best explained by a mysterious, loving presence, a life force at the very least, which hard wired the human species to have those longings in the first place, and which keeps nurturing us along. And for me, its not such a big step to go from a loving life-force behind it all, to a personal God, and then, to that God's chosen manifestation in the form of Jesus, who embodies the three things we most long for: immortality, justice and wholeness, and who came to personalize the Life Force. He came to reveal to us the way of ongoing spiritual transformation such that we, too, slowly transform into eternal beings of wholeness and love, eventually taking our place in a world where all has been brought to rights, where "all shall be well" and every tear shall be wiped away, and we shall see no longer through a glass dimly, but face to face, as we and the world at large are restored and transformed into shining, resurrection wholeness.

That, in a nutshell, is why I believe. That and the dozens of Hospice deaths I have attended over the years where it was more the norm than the exception for those making the transition through the veil of death to see something I couldn't see...something beautiful and whole and loving and compelling...something that caused them, almost to a person, look into the upper corner of the room, and to raise their hands and seem to reach for another world to which they were drawing near.

I still have times of doubt, but they no longer eat at me like they used to. And, by grace, I have times of extreme certainty, too. Times when I

am grasped at a deep, emotional level, by a sense of grace and strength and wisdom that is much larger than I, and which provide a different way of knowing that indeed, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. These moments are rare, but they do happen. There are little glimpses for each of us doubting Thomases, for each of us whose faith is so often flimsy and frail, & who struggle with our feet of clay humanity on a daily basis.

Former Cleveland Bishop, James Pila, in an address to young men about to become priests, said it this way: "Christ is not just for those who are convinced, but for those who, like Peter, wonder why they lose heart and begin to sink. Christ is for those who, like Thomas, know what they are capable of, and who try mightily to salvage a few sacred moments in a life of so many ambiguous years."

So if, like me, you tend to be a Thomas, take heart. Even though Jesus blessed those who didn't need proof, let's not overlook the fact that he also came to Thomas on Thomas's own terms. It was but a moment in a life of ambiguity, but it was a moment none the less. I believe there is a moment for each of us, or if not a moment, then a slow, less dramatic, gradual process, wherein the scales can gradually be tipped, and one finds oneself more often on the side of faith than of doubt. And as Mickey says in the magnificent, closing scene of the movie, "Hannah and Her Sisters" where he finally comes to a tenuous faith himself, "It's a pretty slender reed to hang your whole life on, but maybe a slender reed is all we get." And what that character may or may not have known is that the book of Isaiah says, "a slender reed, our God will not break, and a flickering candle, our God will not extinguish." Indeed, that unconditionally, loving Mother, whom we celebrate today, takes us in her arms, and shows us her scars. That we too might believe.