

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 42
SECOND LESSON: John 20:19-31
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ORDINARY COMMUNION

“Wanting Proof”

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When I was a new Christian in my early twenties in Scotland, I was immersed in a Christian culture where a lot of emphasis was placed on having faith. That shouldn't be a problem, right? And yet it kind of was, because the type of faith being described felt artificial. Life is a very uncertain proposition. And yet the example all around me was of Christians determined to be certain about their faith, to just blindly believe with all their might come what may. To voice a doubt or raise a question was unthinkable. But my gut rebelled against this because it seemed like all people were doing was deliberately suppressing doubt. As uncomfortable as it made me, I couldn't help but suspect that a lot of what passed for faith was really magical thinking. And this understanding of faith as absolute blind certainty furthermore made God into a kind of monstrous tyrant who rewarded people for denying reality but rejected them for seeking the truth. Salvation became dependent upon how much a person could deny. Critical thinking became a sin.

As you may suspect, I wasn't very good at this. This kind of model praises people for having “strong” faith if they are narrow minded and refuse to think deeply. It also blames people who lose their certainty accusing them of losing their faith when life comes along dealing endless blows. But the truth is we don't lose our faith in the midst of suffering. We just lose an illusion. Faith in God is not blind and unquestioning belief. It is a relationship, and like all good relationships, a lot of dialogue is involved.

Peter and John had seen the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene came afterward to tell them that she had seen the Lord. None of it had been convincing. They needed a lot more proof than that. That proof came later that day, on the evening of the first day of the week. They were all together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. (Not that a few locks would have kept Roman soldiers out if they had decided to break down the doors.) But door or no door, Jesus was suddenly there standing among them. He was real, and yet how did he get in there? He showed them his hands and side to prove to them that he was real. But his body had somehow been changed. They were overjoyed. But clearly, they were also just at the beginning of figuring things out. And one of their number, Thomas, was not there.

Thomas was an intense and faithful man. He had been ready to die with Jesus. The crucifixion and all of its horror had devastated him. He refused to

believe them. He said, “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 so another week passed. I can’t imagine what they were doing, thinking or saying to one another. This time it was Sunday evening again, and this time Thomas was there when Jesus appeared. Though the doors were again 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 responded, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Thomas gets a lot of blame for being the doubter, but in reality he was no different from the others. They didn’t believe Mary when she told them she had seen the Lord before they saw Jesus for themselves. Thomas didn’t ask for anymore “proof” than they did. It does not appear that Thomas actually touched Jesus’ wounds. Seeing him and hearing him was enough. And his confession of faith, “My Lord and my God!” was all the greater. Jesus’ response to Thomas in turn was not really a rebuke. It was a blessing for all of us who come afterward who have not met Jesus in the flesh.

It is easy to feel inadequate in our faith when we compare ourselves to the disciples, but if we stop to think about it, even after Jesus’ resurrection the disciples did not initially run forth into the street and proclaim the good news. Understanding came over time in the 40 days between the resurrection and ascension when Jesus appeared at intervals and taught them. Boldness came later with Pentecost. That first week, even after they had seen Jesus, the disciples stayed glued in place. They were staying in the same home. They were living cautiously and quietly together. They didn’t really know what to do next, nor did they have the confidence they needed. They were reaching towards faith.

Most of us have wanted to crawl under a rock at one point or another. Life circumstances can be overwhelming and all we want to do is retreat. When we feel anxious or threatened our instinct is to hide. We hunker down and withdraw. All of our attention is directed towards security. We become risk avoidant in the extreme. And this was certainly the case with the first disciples of Jesus. They may have just seen the risen Christ, but before that they had been through hell, and nothing was as it had been before. They didn’t know what was ahead, only that it was totally unknown. There was no going back to the comfortable and familiar. But Jesus came into that darkness speaking peace.

We proclaim that the Lord is risen on Easter Sunday. But a week later we doubt. We sing joyfully and then we wonder how these things could really happen. The world is a complete mess. Nothing has really changed since Jesus’ time. We just kill each other more efficiently now. We wonder and we question but we rarely speak these words out loud, because to do so would somehow make them more real.

It’s okay to be real. It’s okay to express doubt. It is especially okay to express doubt to God. I began my faith journey by saying, “I don’t know if you’re even real, God.” Faith that hasn’t struggled over the issues of suffering

in the world and the reality of injustice isn't really faith. It's make-pretend. The disciples had to grow in their faith and understanding, as do we.

When Jesus was called to heal Jairus' daughter her desperate father asked him to heal her, if he could. Jesus told him that anything is possible for the one who believes, and the man responded, "Lord I believe. Help my unbelief." This is where we all live, somewhere between belief and unbelief.

Christianity is not an easy message. It's shocking, even offensive. It is more acceptable in our world to acknowledge God in a generic way, than Jesus. How could a human being be the son of God? Why should his dying on a cross make any difference to me? And these are valid questions. And the best way to handle them is directly. Sometimes people are afraid to question because they secretly fear that the fragile thing they have constructed and called faith will blow away and there will be nothing left. There will be no Jesus, no God at all. But it is always safe to question God. God will not crumble under the weight of our questions. We can read what theologians say. We can challenge trite answers. We can wrestle with the issues. And from personal experience I can say that the best way to deal with doubt is to say the words out loud to God directly. If it is Jesus we are having a problem with, we can say, ***Jesus, I need to know if you're real. I need to know if any of this is real.*** I feel I need to add the caveat here, however, that this is not a quick once and done. As much as we don't like it because we want instant gratification and have short attention spans, we will need to do this more than once! But the answer will come. It does not always come right away, but it does come.

Part of our journey of faith is living with uncertainty. This is why fundamentalist religions are so popular. There is no uncertainty at all. But real faith consists of wrestling with God, and not having all of the answers. I have probably gained more spiritually in my life in the times that I have yelled at God than the times I have been polite. If I'm not sure Jesus is real, then I challenge God to show me that Jesus is real.

We all want proof, but even if Jesus stood right in front of us, we would have doubts. That's not a defect. It's not a design flaw. We were made that way. God designed us to be skeptical so we would not blindly follow the wrong things. Unfortunately, many people still do blindly follow the wrong things! But to have faith and to have questions goes hand in hand, because faith is not certainty. **Faith is trust.** Amen.

Isaiah 42

42 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

² He will not shout or cry out,

or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”
⁵ This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
⁶ “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
⁸ “I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.
²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”
²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”
But he said to them, “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.”
²⁶ A week later his 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!” ²⁷ 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.”

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

29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”