



“Doubt and Faith”

John 20: 19-31

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 8, 2011

The setting for today’s passage is Easter evening. You remember that on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Christ and sprinted to tell the disciples. However, not having witnessed Jesus for themselves, the disciples were skeptical. That evening, in a house somewhere in Jerusalem, they are cowering behind locked doors. They represent for us, not a mighty example of faith, but the rather the epitome of doubt.

Our text says the disciples “fear the Jews” and fear is often a driving element of faithlessness. But lest we twist this text to justify hostility toward Jews, it is essential to remember that the author of John uses the phrase, “the Jews” as shorthand to refer to the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. Jesus and his followers were all Jews. Gentiles would not become followers of Christ for two decades. Unfortunately, generations of Christians that arose much later either forgot this distinction or intentionally ignored it. Throughout history, the Gospel of John has proven a favorite of those looking for a reason to justify anti-Semitism.

So, it is Easter evening and the disciples are hiding behind bolted doors when suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. He seeks to reassure them that death was not the victor and they are not alone. He says, “Peace be with you.” His words recall what he said to them at the Last Supper when he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The peace Christ gives is to assure troubled hearts and to replace fear with courage.

Jesus does not strike dead their adversaries. He does not rid the world of the pain and suffering it routinely inflicts. He stands in their midst as testimony that adversity, affliction and death do not pronounce the final benediction. God’s love for us is everlasting.

Thankfully our text does not end there. It recognizes that we are human and that our faith is not always as strong and confident as we would like it to be. When serious illness strikes, when tornadoes devastate and kill hundreds, when wars persist, when we lose a loved one, when people are hungry, when injustice wins the day, doubts seep into our minds.

Today’s text reminds us that this was also the case for the closest friends of Jesus. We read that one of the disciples, Thomas, was not present on Easter evening when Jesus first appeared to them. One week later, Thomas is with the others and they are again in the house

behind closed doors. Jesus appears again and says once more, “Peace be with you.” He goes on to urge Thomas, and I think all of the disciples, with these words: “Do not doubt but believe.”

Jesus acknowledges that doubt is inevitable. No one breezes through life with a firm faith that never wavers. When life is cruel or unfair, naturally doubts emerge.

In her book, *Acedia and Me*, Kathleen Norris describes the illness of her husband, David. He was in an out-of-town hospital receiving treatments and so she stayed in a nearby motel. The evenings alone in the tiny motel room were long and lonely. She knew his respiratory problems were life threatening, yet when he died it was crippling. She wrote, “I lost my identity as a married woman. The community of two that had constituted my marriage was no more, and I had no idea how I would inhabit the devastating word, *widow*. As for prayer, I was not surprised...that when I needed the consolation that only prayer can bring, I was unable to pray.”¹

Have you ever been there? Empty inside and unable to pray?

Doubt is like a desert. It is a life-threatening place. It is an empty environment where life-giving water is scarce. The protection of shelter and shade are difficult to find. Nourishment is non-existent. The desert is a barren place; and when doubt dominates our internal landscape, we feel barren inside.

When Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” he wants us to have confidence in God. He wants us to trust God not only when life is good, but also when life brings grief; not only when life is delightful, but also when life is a disaster.

Despite her emptiness and doubt, Kathleen Norris kept praying the same simple prayer. She prayed, “This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly.”

Many people give up on God when life turns sour. They mistakenly believed that their good fortune had been the result of their own faithfulness, and, when life unraveled, they thought God had abandoned them or that God had never been there in the first place.

Sometimes faith is the confident belief that God is our strength in times of trouble, our guide when the way is uncertain and our hope in times of despair. But sometimes faith means to continue to trust God when our confidence is shot and we feel overwhelmed by doubt. Faith is continuing to pray when we’re not sure God is listening or even there. It is continuing to come to worship when we would rather be doing something else. It is continuing to embody religious virtues when we see others succeed by discarding them. Faith is gritted teeth determination to keep up the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, financial giving, and compassion to others even during a dark night of the soul.

Henri Nouwen, one of the greatest spiritual writers of our time, wrote in his journal one year before his death that he did not want to pray or even like to pray because his prayer life seemed “as dead as a rock.”² Yet, he refused to surrender to his doubts and instead asked himself “Are the darkness and dryness of my prayer signs of God’s absence, or are they signs of a presence deeper and wider than my senses can contain? Is the death of my prayer the end of my intimacy with God or the beginning of a new communion, beyond words, emotions, and bodily sensations?”³

Many of you are acquainted with the author, Anne Lamott. You may have seen her when she came to Westminster several years ago, or you may have read some of her books. Sometimes Lamott's language is salty, sometimes humorous, but often memorable. A good friend of mine heard Lamott a couple of years ago and says that of all the clever things she said that night, six particular words have stayed with him: "Trust the captain, trust the crew."

Lamott pointed out that those words were not her own. The phrase came from the title of an episode of *The West Wing*, the TV series from a few years ago. The episode was about a U.S. submarine that was in trouble in North Korean waters. The president was faced with a dilemma. If he did nothing, their situation might deteriorate and lives would be lost. On the other hand, if he or any navy personnel radioed the sub to gather more information, the boat and its crew would be discovered immediately by the North Koreans provoking an international incident, perhaps even sparking war.

Wrestling with this dilemma, the President finally decided that the best thing to do was to let the captain and the crew of the sub handle the crisis on their own. The President chose to trust the captain, trust the crew.

Lamott latched onto the phrase because, as a Christian, she knows it is a marvelous statement about keeping faith in God and the Christian community. It resonates with her so well that she has "Trust the Captain, trust the crew," tattooed on her ankle.³ This morning we are laminating name tags. I'm thinking next Sunday, tattoos!

In times of fear and in times of loneliness, when our souls feel barren and our lives seem meaningless, it is vital for us to remember that resurrection does not come after success, it follows suffering. Resurrection does not come after celebration, it follows crucifixion. The new day dawns after dying and doubt.

When life is a struggle and your faith is weak, maintain your spiritual practices even if it feels as if you are simply going through the motions. Sooner or later you will sense God's Spirit and your inward being will change. Gratitude will return, feelings of joy will kick in. And the peace of God that is beyond anything reason and intellect can grasp will settle in your soul.

NOTES

1. Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), p. 249-250.
2. Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p.5.
3. *Ibid.*, p.6.
4. Charles Grant, "Trust the Captain, Trust the Crew," May 1, 2011.