



“Doubt”

John 10:1-10

Al Bunis

April 13, 2008

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I want to start off this morning with a confession...I'm a political junkie. Now I know that politics and the pulpit are a dangerous mix, so let me put your minds at ease...this sermon is not about politics. But I really do love the political season...and while I'm guessing many of you are exhausted by this seemingly never-ending presidential process, believe it or not, I'll actually be disappointed when it's over...

But being a junkie doesn't mean I have to like everything about the drug...and there are plenty of things that bother me about today's politics and many of today's politicians...and chief among them is the fact that politicians are seemingly never supposed to reveal any doubt.

As politicians speak you can almost hear them thinking “that's my story and I'm sticking with it.” Politicians have to be great actors and actresses...convincing voters that they are absolutely certain that their position is the only correct one...and that it is guaranteed to work...yes, lots of guarantees, and rarely any doubts...at least that they would care to admit.

Well, for those of you who might have peaked at your bulletin, you'll know that today's sermon topic is doubt...which really isn't so surprising since the today's readings include the story of Doubting Thomas from the Gospel of John.

Yes, we are going to do something that rarely happens in the political world...we are going to explore the concept of doubt...doubts about our faith.

I want to start by re-reading a portion of that passage from the Gospel of John beginning with Thomas' defiant comment to his fellow Disciples:

Thomas says: “ ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’”

I consider this to be among the most powerful and moving of passages in the Bible...As you hear this story, you can almost see the expression on Thomas' face go blank...his defiance seems to dissolve. It feels as if Thomas goes almost limp...tired of fighting what he is destined to believe. One can imagine his lip quivering as he says to Jesus “My Lord and my God.”

Yes I consider this to be an extraordinarily powerful and moving passage...but I also see this as among the most realistic of passages in all of the Bible.

I see this passage as a straightforward acknowledgment by the author of the Gospel of John that doubt is something Christians have to wrestle with...especially since we won't be able to gather physical evidence as Thomas did.

Now when it comes to my faith, I don't mind admitting that I have doubts...fundamental doubts. But I don't see this as a radical confession. In fact I'd say that my admission is consistent with our passage from the Gospel of John.

Jesus says "do not doubt, but believe"...but he only says this after Thomas feels his wound...after Thomas has gathered physical evidence...after Thomas has his proof.

But Jesus then immediately turns to the idea that the rest of us won't have access to such evidence. Jesus' special blessing to those who believe without seeing seems an explicit and realistic acknowledgment that the rest of us will always have doubt to wrestle with.

I think we can see a similar realistic approach when we look at the Lectionary...For those of you not familiar with the Lectionary, it is a calendar of recommended scriptural readings that are used in many Christian Churches each Sunday. This calendar operates on three-year cycles with readings typically appearing once every three years.

But every year after Easter Sunday, this three-year cycle rule is temporarily suspended. Each year Christians go through the same ritual. After the highs of Easter, the lectionary turns to the topic of doubt...always with this story about Doubting Thomas.

Clearly the wise folks who constructed the Lectionary decided that this story is too important for every third year. And I guess the not-so-subtle message is that the euphoria of Easter won't be with us all the time...doubt is likely to creep in...so we might as well face it head on.

And so it's not surprising that almost literally a year ago to the day, David gave a sermon entitled the "Faithfulness of Doubt" based on this same scripture...a wonderful sermon. He spoke of his own doubts and the trust that is so important for his acceptance of these doubts. I recommend going back to our website and re-reading it.

"Faithfulness of Doubt" is an expression coined by the well-known and recently deceased Christian thinker, Madeleine L'Engle. One of her most important points is that you can't use logic to free your faith of doubt...that just doesn't work. L'Engle has a wonderful quote that captures this idea:

"With my naked intellect I cannot believe in God...My intellect is convinced that any idea of a person's continuing and growing after death is absurd; logic goes no further than dust to dust." Yes, she sees her faith, the Christian faith, as pretty preposterous...hers isn't an unquestioning faith.

Just a week ago, Dale Irvin, the President of NY Theological Seminary, made a similar point from this pulpit...that faith isn't about seeing with the mind...it's about seeing with the heart.

David, L'Engle and Dale are saying the same thing...faith and doubt are inseparable.

Throughout Christian history there are many great quotes on this same topic. Here are a couple of pretty blunt ones. St. Augustine: "Doubt is but another element of faith." And

Paul Tillich, probably America's leading 20th-century Christian theologian says almost exactly the same thing: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

Yes, there are many great Christian thinkers who tell us that faith and doubt are inseparable...that its OK to doubt...but let's not just take their word for it...let's instead do what Christians are supposed to do...let's go back to scripture.

Let's start with the Psalms...take a random read through just a few Psalms and you will quickly notice that it isn't all praise and glory for God...praise quickly becomes complaint in the Psalms...Our reading from Psalm 22 is just one of many, many examples...albeit one of the most well known..."My God, why have you forsaken me?" In many Psalms the tone shifts on a dime...right in the middle of a Psalm...without warning...shifting from one extreme to the other...from glorious praise to accusatory lament and visa versa...the Psalms often feel like an ongoing battle between faith and doubt....

Now let's turn to a couple of what you might call the "leading men" of the Bible...I think you'll recognize their stories.

Let's look at Moses...in Exodus he protested to God several times that he would not be able to lead the Israelite slaves out of Egypt...this despite God's repeated promises to be with him. Our reading from Exodus is the first of three such protests...Maybe Moses was a bit like Doubting Thomas in that he too was looking for proof from God...evidence to reassure his doubts. I guess he needed more than a burning bush to convince him.

And how about Jesus...In the Garden of Gethsemane, he pleads with God "let this cup pass from me" implying that this was all God's idea, not his...and even in Jesus' final words..."My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Many see these as words that Jesus borrowed from Psalm 22. Regardless, it seems that Jesus had his doubts until the end. Neither He nor scripture tries to hide this.

Yes, I'd say we have some pretty good examples of doubters in the Bible...and if it's OK for them, I think its OK for us. And that, of course, is a key message of this morning's sermon. It is OK to doubt. In fact, it is unrealistic to think you won't have doubt. Not only does Scripture seem to be instructing us that we are allowed to doubt, it also seems to be explicitly saying that doubt is very much a part of faith.

Yes it's OK to doubt...but that isn't the only message today. If we turn back to Moses and Jesus, we can see that they had something in common as it relates to their doubt ...their doubt didn't stop them from doing what their faith told them they had to do. Their doubt didn't constrain acting on their faith. Their doubt didn't stop their action.

Let me give you a more contemporary example of faithful action in the face of doubt...let's look at Mother Theresa. In a recent book which is a collection of her letters, she repeatedly laments the absence of Jesus and God in her life. Let me read you two quotes.

"What do I labor for? If there be no God – there can be no soul – if there is no soul then Jesus – You also are not true."

"God – please forgive me – When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul – I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart."

There are many more quotes...I'll spare you more of her "agony"...but her perspective might be summed up by the fact that at times she refers to Jesus as the "Absent One".

I was at first surprised when I read that the beginning of her doubt coincided with the beginning of her ministry to the poor in the slums of Calcutta.

But upon reflection, this actually seems logical...her doubts started just as she began to see up-close the unfair hand dealt to the poor she was ministering to...my guess is that we all might have doubts about the justice of God if we saw the things she saw as often as she saw them.

But as I read her quotes, something else jumped off the page...It occurred to me that she too was a bit like Doubting Thomas in one way...she was looking for proof or evidence of God and Jesus. She wanted reassurance...like all of us. But in looking for this evidence, sadly, it seems that she missed the obvious evidence that was literally right under her nose.

Yes, in looking for evidence of the presence of God, she overlooked the fact that *she was the evidence*...she was the sign of God's existence. It saddens me to think of the torture she was going through looking for signs...which makes it all the more amazing that she kept at her calling...

Yes, Mother Theresa was the evidence of God and Jesus in the world...it was her action, her work with the poor, *despite her doubt*, that is the very essence of the faith that Jesus spoke about throughout the Gospels.

Mother Theresa may have overlooked this evidence, but I can assure you that the poor of Calcutta did not.

Now I want to conclude this sermon in a pretty unorthodox manner...I want to summarize the two main ideas into simple formulas. I think it will be helpful. I want to put these ideas in the form of equations...but don't worry...you won't need a calculator:

Formula #1: faith + doubt = faith...St. Augustine said it succinctly: "Doubt is but another element of faith." Yes, we're not alone in thinking that faith + doubt is still faith. Don't worry about your doubts...they aren't going away...and don't let them paralyze you...which leads me to the second formula.

Formula #2: faith + doubt + *action* = evidence of God.

I'm going to restate this because it is the real point of today's sermon. *If we act on our faith, as guided by Jesus, and despite our doubt, then we become evidence of God.* Of course, we all can't be Mother Theresa. Different people have different callings. But if we listen to what Jesus had to say, it's clear that we need to act out our faith despite our doubts.

As Christians it seems crucial to understand that we need to do more than simply having faith...we need to do faith...we need to act. Our faith is the platform that gives us the strength and confidence to act...to love our neighbors as ourselves...to do good things in the world...to be evidence of God.

Please join me in a closing prayer:

We thank you God for Mother Theresa...and we ask you give us the wisdom to accept our doubts...and the strength to figure our own special way to be your evidence on earth.

Amen.