

COMING TO FAITH (JN 20:19-31)

Sermon by the Rev. Corinne Hodges, Sun., April 19, 2009, SJOC

- I. 15 years ago debate with spouse of friend—signs of God’s presence
 - A. My position—times in life when I know God has led me somewhere, sent me a sign of what to do when. Times when God has directed me, made things right. Times when I can say with absolute certainty God was present and at work.
 - B. Man, grew up going to church, was skeptical. Dealt in fact and figures. Said that reading signs as messages of God is dangerous. His position, when you start to read God into the happenings of this world, you can read things into things that are not there in the first place.
 - C. At the heart of our debate was interpretation. What I saw, felt and knew as the handiwork of God he did not.
 - D. Supernova in the news this week—1,700 yrs to reach earth; some believe it is the “hand of God,” others not.
 - E. I could not convince him that they were, nor could he convince me that they were not. What was evidence for me, was not for him. In the end, neither of us could prove our position beyond a doubt.

- II. Gospel reading today, all the disciples are doubters, not just Thomas—bad rap as “Doubting Thomas”
 - A. First scene on the first Sunday of Easter (comparable to last week), the disciples are gathered—Thomas is not present
 - B. Second Sunday of Easter (comparable to today), Thomas is there
 - C. Similarities between the two Sundays:
 1. Doors are locked for protection and safety
 2. Disciples are afraid of the Jews—of being arrested and killed like Jesus (several were martyred at later dates) and at first, unable to see Christ
 3. Jesus enters, break into that closed space
 4. “Peace be with you” traditional greeting, a blessing
 5. Although they see the Lord, it is not until they see his scars that they believe (true on both Sundays, first with disciples, then Thomas)
 6. The disciples needed proof, evidence for Christ to be real
 7. Thomas was just the courageous one who spoke his conditions for believing out loud—to touch the wounds of Christ—but do not be fooled, the others had theirs as well

- III. Fact is that doubts about faith and what to believe are not new
 - A. Seminary disputations—Montanism, Nicene Creed, arguments over God, the nature of Christ

- B. Challenging exercises, esp. if given the side to defend that you did not personally support
 - C. Good exercise to help us articulate what we actually believed and why—often could say what we believed, but more difficult was providing the backup, the reasoning behind it
 - D. By the end of the term, we discovered that so many of the decisions of the early church could have gone the other way—disputes were often on technicalities about relationships (wording about those relationships) within God which we will never, at least in this lifetime, know the answers to nor understand
 - E. For my teacher, his conclusion: in life you eventually reach a point where you have to make a decision—you choose to believe or not. He chose to join the believers, the martyrs, the saints, the disciples. “If I am wrong, I have lost nothing”
- IV. Doubts are normal and natural—we treat them as if they are wrong or bad, like people should never doubt
- A. But one could say our generations have it harder. We do not have to knowledge of the disciples, who were first-hand witnesses to Christ’s presence.
 - B. However, we have inherited Scripture, the incredible testimony from those who were there, those who did see, speak and touch Christ—we are told to trust these stories as truth. In last paragraph: Stories of Jesus’ signs “are written in this book that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”
 - C. Yet this statement confirms that all people, even then, had doubts at some point or another
 - D. Anyone who has lived long enough knows this is true. How doubts can creep in esp. in times of illness, loss, numbness, “purpose of life”
 - 1. The fact is that faith allows for the possibility of doubt
 - 2. For faith cannot be proven, as my friend’s husband pointed out. If it could be, it would no longer be faith but something tangible, earthly. It would be factually known, not believed.
 - E. Gospel shows we all need to “come to believe” in our own way. Different people have different needs. So while Jesus asks us to come to believe in him, how we get to that position is individual.
 - 1. Some of us need to see like the disciples, some need to feel like Thomas, some have an inner knowing, others trust based on experience
 - 2. Some learn to believe early in life and the rest of their lives the challenge is maintaining/continuing that faith. For others it’s a life long struggle, not an easy acceptance of things unseen

3. For some people the loss of faith or doubts about what or who we believe in lasts a day, a week, a few hours, but for others, it can be years of darkness, confusion and uncertainty
 4. Truth is there is no right or wrong way in coming to faith
 - a. No one can tell us where we “should be” on our faith journey
 - b. No one can do the work of revelation, the sometimes agonizing task of coming to belief for us
 - c. Even in a supportive community like SJOC, the actual coming to terms of what we believe is an intimate, deeply personal and at times lonely road
 - d. But it’s a worthwhile journey, esp. when we discover or recover our faith as Thomas does in the second scene, proclaiming with great joy Jesus as “My Lord and my God!”
 - e. When we are reunited with Christ, this is when we finally receive his blessing of peace
- V. Can anything good come from having doubts? Thomas is an example of what can happen when we openly admit and share our questions
- A. His request to touch Jesus brought Thomas face-to-face with the risen Christ. His doubts actually drew him closer to God
 - B. Thomas’ questions and conditions were blessings in disguise
 - C. In my own life, this has been my story as well. Doubts have often strengthened rather than destroyed my faith
 - D. But I had to walk that tough road of wonderment and discovery to get there, trusting that God would lead me, would find me
- VI. The most redeeming part of our story today is that Jesus knew exactly what Thomas needed to come to faith and provided it for him
- A. Christ knows what we need and will provide for us as well
 - B. I ask you, what are the conditions for your faith? What do you need to see, feel, hear or experience in order to believe that Christ is alive, well and working in your life?
 - C. If you are tired, afraid and unsure of how to find your faith, have no fear. For Christ always has a way to reach us.
 1. Jesus is not stopped by locked doors—be they physical entrances to buildings like in the gospel or the doors to our own very souls and minds
 2. Jesus is always there whispering in our ears and to our hearts, “Do not be unbelieving, but believe.”