

***A sermon preached on April 28th, 2019 based upon John 20:19-31 entitled
“Thomas and the Longing for an Experience of God”***

Thomas often gets a bad rap. “Doubting Thomas,” is what he’s called. Don’t be like Doubting Thomas. I suspect this whole way of viewing Thomas arose from church authorities – that is “clergy” -- who didn’t like lay people asking questions. *Believe what you’re told and don’t question! Fall in line and be obedient sheep!*

To this day, there are churches where if you ask too many questions about what the church says you’re supposed to believe, you are either told to shut up or to leave.

As I think over my life I see Thomas as something of a hero. If you read John’s Gospel Thomas asks more questions than the other disciples. Thomas had a brain and it generated questions. For me it’s a no-brainer that God gave us brains and expects us to use them, and engaging my brain is a part of the life of faith. It simply never worked for me to be told I shouldn’t ask questions about ultimate truth.

But Thomas also clearly has a heart. There is no question that he loved Jesus – that Jesus was his “Lord.”

I’ve shared some of my faith journey in the past. I was raised in Methodist Churches, but in my teenage years, in a difficult time (my parents got divorced) I fell away from church and gave up on Christianity. I didn’t see how the “beliefs” that were recited in the creeds on Sunday mornings had much of an effect on the way people lived. For whatever reason, I didn’t experience a lot of love in church at that point in my life when I could have used it.

In college, however two things happened for me. I took a theology course in which at the theologian put forth the notion that “faith” and “doubt” weren’t opposites; rather doubt was a part of faith, because faith is about ultimate concerns, and the questioning, doubting part of ourselves necessarily needs to be engaged when we’re focusing on what matters most. This was good news to me. It meant there was room for me with my “doubts” in the circle.

The other thing was I took a course in the New Testament and read the Gospels for the first time. Jesus, who in my experience from church had seemed rather dull – turned out to be anything but. He was dynamically alive, radical, mysterious and compelling. I became enchanted with the guy.

There are two kinds of doubt, and two corresponding kinds of “belief.” There is superficial doubt – a mere intellectual exercise. I watched this video of Richard Dawkins – a famous, brilliant biologist and hero of what is called the “New Atheist Movement” – speaking to an adoring crowd of mostly younger militant atheists. These are people who have seen all the bad things religion has done and has concluded that it is foolish to believe that God exists. Listening to Dawkins, he is clearly brilliant – a lot smarter than me. But he is also arrogant. It was pretty clear he delighted in being

adored as “the smartest guy in the room.” He lacked humility. And it was pretty clear that his heart wasn’t engaged in his doubt. It was simply an intellectual exercise in which he got strokes for defeating those foolish enough to debate him.

Thomas’ brain is engaged in his doubts, but more importantly, so is his heart. Notice what it is he wants to see in order to believe: the wounds on Jesus’ body. He has been traumatized with grief by the violent death of his beloved Lord.

For Thomas, belief isn’t an intellectual exercise regarding the existence of God. The question for Thomas – and I would suggest the question deep down for all of us – is whether God is here with us in our suffering. Does God care? Does our suffering have any significance in the eyes of God?

These two kinds of doubt correspond to two kinds of belief. One is superficial, the mere intellectual assent to creeds that doesn’t transform a life. The other is a deep trust in the mystery of the Living God who is present with us in the deepest struggles of our lives.

When Thomas get’s mocked as the “doubting” disciple, the fact is overlooked that the other disciples didn’t believe at first either when the women told them that Jesus had risen. Last week we heard in Luke’s Gospel how the male disciples dismissed their testimony as an “idle tale.” And this week in John’s Gospel, Mary says the very same thing to them that they later say to Thomas: “I have seen the Lord!” We are not specifically told whether they believed what they were told, but it is clear that if they did the message didn’t sink down inside their hearts. Several hours later, we find them huddled in fear behind locked doors.

So when Thomas demands that he be allowed to see and touch the wounds on Jesus’ body, he is simply asking for what the other disciples were given – his own personal experience of God.

It might surprise you that John’s Gospel is the only one in which Jesus is explicitly “God”. This is set forth at the beginning of the Gospel, and then it is not put directly into words again until Thomas’ confession at the end of the Gospel: “My Lord” (which Jesus already was) “and my God” (Thomas’ new realization.)

This, I would suggest is what all of us want: our own experience of God. A relationship with the mystery out of which we received life and into which we will return when we die.

So what do I mean by an “experience of God”? Like I said last week, it is difficult to pin this down with words. We are talking about a great holy mystery, and words are inadequate. And John’s Gospel makes it clear that it can come in different ways, engaging different senses. (In one case, the fragrance of a perfume filling an entire house.)

But our story gives us some clues regarding how to know whether you've had an experience of God.

First, when Jesus appears to those disciples huddled behind locked doors, they are delivered from their fear. They are given "peace" (Jesus says this twice.) An authentic experience of the holy mystery of God moves us out of fear. It gives us a peace that is not directly related to the outward events of our lives. The disciples felt less afraid and a sense of peace even though their outer world didn't get any less dangerous.

Second, an experience of God allows us to get out of ourselves. There is a powerful metaphor in the image of the disciples huddled behind locked doors – turned inward with self-absorption – and then being set free by Jesus' appearance to go forth into the world to engage lovingly with other human beings. When we encounter God, we find some freedom from the prison cell of our own little ego.

Third, the presence of God can awaken legitimate guilt, but it doesn't leave us there. It leads to forgiveness and an ability to move forward without shame. Peter in particular had some reason to feel guilt and shame – arrogantly he had declared that – in contrast to the others -- he would never abandon Jesus when all hell broke loose. Peter (especially in the story told in John 21) confronts his guilt and experiences forgiveness.

And finally, an experience of God awakens a sense of meaning and purpose to our lives. The women and men who experience the risen Christ are given a message of hope to share with others that involves a love greater than the powers of death.

This theme of the importance of experiencing God is a part of our Methodist heritage. When John Wesley was a young Anglican priest in the beginning of the 18th century England, he was, as they say, "all in his head." He was a brilliant scholar, and arrogant. Then in his early thirties his life came crashing down as a result of his arrogance. It was then in a time of darkness and despair that he went unwillingly to a prayer meeting on a street called Aldersgate and felt his heart "strangely warmed" by the love of Christ, experiencing God's forgiveness and mercy.

The Anglican Church identified three sources upon which to rely in the pursuit of truth. First, the Bible, followed by tradition and reason. John Wesley added a fourth source: Experience. What does our experience tell us about what is true about the mystery we call "God"?

What does this morning's story tell us about how to have an experience of God?

The first thing to be said is that it isn't something we control. As Jesus says earlier in John's Gospel, "the wind (Spirit) blows where it wills..." We can't command God to show up when we require. God shows us on God's own time table.

Those disciples huddled together in fear aren't doing anything we can point to in regards to a "technique" for how to have an experience of God. We aren't told they are praying. They are simply a total mess, paralyzed by their fear.

And yet there are two things to notice out about these disciples. First, they loved Jesus. They had spent a couple of years being enchanted and challenged by the man. So one suggestion that comes from their example would be to make a habit of reading the Gospels. Contemplate the mystery that is Jesus.

The second thing to note is that the disciples were broken: by fear, by grief, by shame. For better or worse, it is often when our lives are broken open by life that our hearts have a greater openness to the movement of God's Spirit. John Wesley is a case in point.

We aren't about to go bust open our lives for the sake of an experience of God. But life has a way of breaking us open, and when this happens, it might be helpful to remember that it is at such times that God often shows up, and to be on the look out.

The example of Thomas tells us two things. First, Thomas wasn't afraid to ask for what he needed, which in his case was to see and feel the wounds on Jesus' risen body. Tell God what you need. (And I don't mean, as Janis Joplin once sang, a "Mercedes Benz.") Again, we don't control the time table, but the promise of scripture is that ultimately we will get what we truly need.

The second thing to learn from Thomas is that it helps to hang out with people who have had some experience of what we are longing for. Thomas kept hanging out with the other disciples, and in their midst and with their support he was given the experience he needed. (And again, the church didn't kick him out because he didn't believe what they believed. They made room in the circle for him.)

As I said last week on Easter Sunday, we live in a culture in which people are not encouraged to seek out experiences of the holy mystery that we call God. Nonetheless, this is what all people hunger for, even if we lack the words to express it. I noted how we live in a time of unprecedented material prosperity, but a sense of life's inherent meaning is increasingly a scarcity.

I am teaching a confirmation class with fifteen teenage youth. They are great kids who all come from homes where, relatively speaking there is both a lot of love and material security. And yet I am struck by the degree of pressure these normal middle class kids from happy homes live with. I polled them, and for the most part I'm pretty sure they come to my class by their own volition. It seems to me that in the midst of their crowded lives they long for a way to make a connection to the great mystery that is God.

What we call the "Mainline" church – of which our church is a part – has been in decline for fifty years. There are a lot of reasons for this, but perhaps one is related to what I'm talking about.

If I were to ask you what it is you love about our church, I suspect most of you would say that it feels like a family. That you feel loved and supported – that you can count on people being there for you to share your joys and your times of trouble.

This is a wonderful and critical thing. But, I wonder if something more is needed. Communal support can be found in other ways besides being a part of a church. What makes a church different?

I would simply close by challenging us with this thought: beyond being a community that is here for one another in our times of need, are we a community that comes together – especially on Sunday morning – with a common quest, expectation, hope of some kind of encounter with God? Are we open and expectant that God will show up in surprising ways as we gather together? That God will somehow speak to us, nudge us, hug us, challenge us, move among us, and awaken us in ways that words can not adequately express?

Because that is, I believe, what we all long for at the deepest level, but perhaps we are afraid to openly embrace that desire.