4-26-20 online Faith When You Doubt Rev. Amy Haines

Jn 20:24-29 Easter Season

What doubts are swirling in you today? Do you doubt that we can re-open businesses soon without a sudden spike in illness? Do you doubt that you are keeping up well with your schoolwork? Do you doubt God’s presence with you today?

Simply defined, doubt is uncertainty. And right now, we live in a world of uncertainty. How long will we be shuttered in place? How will this change our normal patterns of living? Where is God in the midst of this virus?

Doubt can lead us in two directions.

Doubt can lead us to unbelief if we have to have proof to have all of our doubts answered. For who can prove love? Who can prove miracles? Who can prove the resurrection?

Doubt can also lead to faith if we are willing to live with our questions while seeking more information. Are we willing to trust the word of another? Are we willing to learn as we go? Are we willing to hold onto hope before we have answers?

Henry Drummond once said:

Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is can’t believe. Unbelief is won’t believe. Doubt is honesty. Unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light. Unbelief is content with darkness.

--thepastorsworkshop.com: doubt

Earl Davis reminds us:

There is something strong, something good, in honest doubt. It is not negative or neutral; it is actively seeking faith.

--Earl C. Davis “Thomas—The Doubter?” 4-19-20 ministrymatters.com

As we are called in this Easter Season to Face Everything and Rise, we are also called today to hold onto hope in the midst of uncertainty, and to hold onto faith in the midst of our doubts.

Who better, then, to guide us then the apostle Thomas.

Thomas was one of Jesus’ closest disciples. For three years he had journeyed with Jesus—hearing Jesus’ teaching, seeing Jesus heal, observing Jesus’ welcome of outcasts and sinners, being invited by Jesus to follow God’s kingdom ways.

Thomas was a faithful follower of Jesus.

Yet on that first Easter evening, Thomas was given a nickname that has stuck with him throughout history: Doubting Thomas.

On that first Easter evening, even after the women had witnessed to the resurrection, the disciples huddled together behind locked doors, struggling to believe. Fear mingled with hope was the reality of that first Easter day.

Thomas was not with the other disciples when suddenly Jesus came to stand among them, behind their locked doors of fear and failure, to offer his presence and his peace, his forgiveness and his renewed calling of them as his disciples.

Where Thomas was, Scripture never says. Maybe he was taking a walk. Maybe he was running an errand. Maybe he needed to get away to ponder the words of the women.

No matter where Thomas had been, when he returned to the fellowship of the disciples, and heard that Jesus had appeared now to the men, Thomas struggled to believe. How did a dead man rise from the dead? How did he escape the tomb? How did he appear behind locked doors?

Thomas struggled between faith and doubt, between hope and uncertainty.

So he responded with a call for proof:

“Unless Jesus stands in front of me, where I can see and touch his scars, where I can touch the nail marks in his hands,where I can put my hand into his side, I cannot believe.”

From then on Thomas has been saddled with the nickname Doubting Thomas, for doubting the good news of resurrection joy.

Yet I see Thomas more as a realist than a doubter, a healthy skeptic who struggled to believe what he did not understand, a hands-on kind of guy more than one who relied on the hearsay of others.

Twice before in the Gospel of John, we have a glimpse into Thomas’ personality.

At the death of Lazarus in John 11, Thomas was the only disciple to declare he was willing to return with Jesus to Judea, even if it meant traveling to their deaths. In John 14, Thomas asked a question about the way to heaven, and his words showed more ignorance than struggle.

Yet on that first Easter day, Thomas desperately needed proof to overcome his uncertainty. He needed first-hand experience of Jesus’ scars, not trusting the word and emotions of his companions.

Perhaps, as a realist, Thomas was already considering what a new normal might look like for him, after the grief of Good Friday. Resurrection sounded too good to be true, and too hard to consider what a new way forward might look like when death had been defeated.

Thomas struggled on that first Easter day. How often do we, too, struggle with accepting life-changing news, no matter if the news is good or bad? Surrounded by conspiracy theories, fake news, and exaggerated stories in order to claim 15 minutes of fame, how often do we approach what we hear or read with a skeptical attitude? We want a second opinion. We want to hear it from another source. We want to verify its truth. In so many ways, we are much like Thomas.

Can you imagine the doubt that warred with hope within him in the days after Easter? Can you imagine how he yearned for the good news of the disciples to be true, yet didn’t trust their word until he could prove it by his own encounter with the risen Lord?

That encounter came one week after Easter.

Jesus once again appeared to his disciples, including Thomas, and said,

“Peace be with you.”

Jesus then gave Thomas what he needed when he said,

“Look at my hands. Touch them. Put your hands in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Thomas had wanted the opportunity to prove his faith, and received that opportunity. Yet the Gospel of John never says whether or not Thomas actually touched Jesus or whether just the experience of being in Christ’s presence was enough for Thomas. Whatever the case, when Jesus made himself available to Thomas, Thomas proclaimed his faith in Jesus,

“My Lord and my God!”

Finally, Thomas had the proof he needed—the risen Lord standing in front of him.

Finally, Thomas was able to begin to move toward a new normal—following a risen Lord!

Thomas moved from doubt to belief, from seeking proof to having a vibrant faith.

Today, how many of us are still much like Doubting Thomas? We still struggle with doubt and fear. We waver between grief and hope. We yearn to return to normal, when in reality, we are called into a new normal. Like Thomas, we cannot go back to the way things were. Instead, we must be open to what might be.

This is true as we face this virus. This is true for whatever the future holds for our denomination. This is true as we seek to live as a follower of Jesus.

Like Jesus did with Thomas, Jesus does with us today. Jesus encourages us to be honest with our emotions. Honest with our grief. Jesus encourages us to be honest with our uncertainty. Honest with our questions. Jesus also encourages us to be honest with our hope. Honest with our possibilities.

In a world fighting an unknown virus, how do we move forward as a church community in ways that do no harm, do good and grow our walk with God?

As followers of Jesus, how do we move forward in ways that value faith and family, that value both those settled and those struggling, that honor all generations amid their celebrations and their loneliness?

The blessing Jesus offered to Thomas is also a blessing for us today:

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

We will never see Jesus in the flesh this side of heaven, yet we can still believe in Jesus. We will never have scientific proof in the resurrection, yet we can be open to resurrection faith changing our lives.

Believing in such good news does not mean that we have it all together. Believing in such good news does not mean that we will never doubt.

Believing in such good news does mean that even when we don’t understand this thing we call faith, we are still willing to trust God. Believing in such good news does mean that we are willing to be in relationship with Jesus, step by faithful step.

Like the disciples on that first Easter evening, we, too, have been sent to live and love the world around us in Jesus’ name.

Today, look around you, and see the ways God is present with us.

Today, look around you, and see the ways God invites us to share the good news of resurrection hope with others.

Today, look around you, and open your hearts to the ways God is re-creating the church into something yet unseen.

May we continue in this Easter Season to Face Everything and Rise with hope in the midst of uncertainty, faith in the midst of doubt and joy in the face of struggle.

May it be so. Let us pray.