

"Doubting Thomases"

John 20:19-29
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Luke 24:36-43
St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack

Unbelievable! We use that word to describe a variety of things. These might be things which catch us completely by surprise, for we really didn't expect them to happen. These might be things that seemed unlikely or unexpected or startling - or that we just did not believe would ever happen.

Unbelievable is a word that we could use to describe the disciple's reaction to Jesus' teaching that He must suffer and then be put to death. That wasn't what they expected from the Messiah. That wasn't what in their minds was supposed to happen, and so they weren't ready to believe it. Jesus would say the words, but they wouldn't really listen, for they felt that they knew better.

So it was that when Jesus was put to death on the cross, it caught them all by surprise. In spite of what Jesus had taught, they weren't ready. They hadn't expected it. They fled in fear and disbelief and anguish.

On Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead, that caught them equally by surprise. They weren't ready. They didn't know how to receive this news or how to react to it, or in many cases, whether or not they should even believe it.

Thomas is a good example of the latter. The news was just too incredible. It was outside of anything that they had ever experienced before, and as he said, "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe." In order for him to believe, he wanted complete and unassailable proof given directly to him. The word of someone else about their encounter with the risen Christ was not enough. He had to see and touch and feel for himself.

How like Thomas we often are in our lives. When things happen the way that we expect, we just accept them without any real questioning. But, when something is both entirely unexpected and also completely outside of our experience of what is normal and reasonable, we tend to doubt and disbelieve. They couldn't be telling us the truth. They must have gotten something wrong. Prove it to me. I want to see for myself.

On Easter morning the ones who showed up at the tomb were women who had come to prepare the body. They came alone. There was no mass of followers there expecting to

see the risen Christ. They weren't gathering in excitement believing that Jesus death on the cross was the real beginning of a new age and a new church. None of them believed that He still lived. They all believed that He had died, and that all of their hopes and dreams had come crashing down on them.

In our text from Luke, when Jesus appeared to His disciples, they were all terrified. They thought that they were seeing some sort of ghost. They didn't quite know who or what He was, but in spite of all that Jesus had taught them, none of them expected to see the risen Christ. It was only after they saw and heard, and he even ate a piece of fish in their presence that they started to understand and to believe.

You know in some ways I think that Thomas gets a bad rap. We tend to talk as if Thomas was the only one who had doubts, but he was far from alone. Thomas certainly had doubts, but all of the disciples, all of the followers of Jesus doubted. He may have been a little more vocal, needed a little more convincing, but in many ways they were all like Thomas. After all, it was all of the disciples who fled when Jesus was arrested and taken off to be tried and then crucified. Even Peter, who had sworn that he would never abandon Jesus, fled in fear and anguish.

The story is told of a farmer in a Midwestern state who had a strong disdain for "religious" things. As he plowed his field on Sunday morning, he would shake his fist at the church people who passed by on their way to worship. October came and the farmer had his finest crop ever - the best in the entire county. When the harvest was complete, he placed an advertisement in the local paper which belittled the Christians for their faith in God. Near the end of his diatribe he wrote, "Faith in God must not mean much if someone like me can prosper."

The response from the Christians in the community was quiet and polite. In the next edition of the town paper, a small ad appeared. It read simply: "God doesn't always settle his accounts in October."

You see this man thought that he had God and life all figured out. I'm sure that somewhere deep inside he had worried all during the growing season that maybe God would punish him for his behavior, that maybe his crop would suffer in some way. But when his crop was the best ever, he believed that he had proved God to be powerless. He had gotten away with his outrageous behavior. In his own mind, he had proven that he was more powerful than God.

You know sometimes we're exactly like that farmer. We usually don't shake our fist at people who go to church - in fact here we all are. But sometimes we think that we can get away with certain things, that God won't really notice. Afterwards, with a sort of sigh of relief, we think to ourselves that we got away with it, that we did it. We assume that God is going to work and respond on our schedule, rather than on the timetable of

eternity, which after all is the one that God has established. And at times, we're a little bit like Thomas, we want God to prove it to us. Show us. Demonstrate the truth to us in clear and unequivocal terms, on the terms that we have established. Show us in the way that we want, that we demand to be shown.

The problem is not that at times we have doubts. Look in the gospel of Luke. All of the disciples, all of the followers of Christ doubted and were caught by surprise in Christ's death and resurrection. The problem is not having the doubts, rather the problem is in the assumption that our doubts are God's problem rather than our own. The problem is in assuming that we can use our doubts to force God to answer them on our terms and in the way that we want. The problem is that we're like Thomas, shaking our doubts in Christ's face and demanding, show me! Let me touch and feel for myself the wounds in your hands and side. Only if you do it my way will I believe. And if God doesn't respond on our terms, then we're like that farmer saying, see God is powerless. I've proven it. I got away with my outrageous behavior!

We all have times of doubt and despair, times when we don't understand and aren't sure how to continue. The reality though is that our doubts are not God's problem, they are ours. They are the symptoms of our own internal struggle with our faith, our struggle when things aren't clear and we're looking for answers, and the answers aren't clear.

You see we're human. We have limitations to our knowledge and to our ability to understand. Sometimes that's hard to understand and to accept in an age where there is so much knowledge about so many things and so readily available. There is so much out there, that we tend to think that humans can come up with all of the answers, solve all of the problems, but the reality is that we can't. Wonderful as our brains are, incredible as are some of the things that people have been discovering and working on, we have very real limits. Some things are difficult or even impossible for us to understand. That's always been true, and I suspect always will be.

Yet, in the midst of our limitations and our inability to understand certain things, I believe that God offers us all the answers that we need. The dilemma for us is that often the answers that God knows that we need are not the answers that we want or are looking for. We're looking for answers on our terms, and God offers them on God's terms. We're looking to have clear and undeniable proof - just like Thomas was, and sometimes what God tells us is that we need to be like the Christians in that midwestern farming community and trust that God's love and judgment are real, even when they don't always come in October, even when a pagan prospers.

I believe that one of the things that God tests us with as we go through life is how we respond to our limitations. How do we cope with and respond to our inability to do certain things, and perhaps even more importantly, how do we cope with and respond to our inability to understand certain things? Do we respond like the farmer by making fun

of those who believe? Do we respond like Thomas and demand proof on our terms? Or do we respond like most of those first followers of Christ, who didn't understand, but when Jesus appeared they listened and believed and chose to trust in God and to follow where God was leading them - even though the way was often confusing.

As Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Amen.