

**Doubts Friendly Face**  
**John 20:19-31**  
***April 11, 2021***

We don't often think of doubt as a friend. Quite the contrary, we usually associate doubt with atheists, lukewarm Christians, and agnostics. Doubt is something bad Christians allow into their living rooms, not something good, upright, moral, Christian folk would permit, even into their basements. But have we got it all wrong? Is doubt a friendly face in the mirror or not? Is he someone you can invite around for a friendly chat on one of your low evenings? Perhaps to share in some banter around the screwed-up nature of your life right now, or the terrible tragedies that continue to plague the world, or the evil thoughts that rise up and bite your mind at the most inopportune moments of your day. Or perhaps you simply want to tell doubt where to go. But for the time being let's just see what ways doubt can be seen as a helpful visitor, helpful to our faith I mean.

I went back to a book I read a few years ago by Nick Hornby called **How to be Good**. The author takes us inside the main character, Kate, whose life as a doctor and mother and wife is being pressured from a number of fronts. One of these is the surprising spiritual conversion of her once caustic, critical, bad tempered husband David. Kate's life has spiraled downhill from the time she decided to have an affair which has only served to increase her feelings of guilt. Now David's conversion into a goody two shoes has only added to these feelings of guilt and intensified her failure at the hopeless attempts to "being good". How can she be a good person? How can she compete with her husband's newly adopted ethic of love, sharing and good will? In her desperation Kate decides to go to church.

The way the author describes Kate's attempts to gather her family around the idea of going to church is highly amusing. Their surprise at this new found desire is to be expected. I'm sure we all know families where church never enters the conversation except perhaps as a voting location or local rummage sale. Kate, like many 21<sup>st</sup> century folk, has never been to a normal Sunday morning church service in her life. She has been to Christenings, funerals, weddings, and special harvest festivals, but never a run-of-the-mill, Sunday kind of thing. The conversation in the kitchen Sunday morning when the

announcement is made about going to church goes something like this.

*What church?* asks David. *The one around the corner,* she replies. *There must be one around the corner. They're like betting shops, churches, aren't they?* Molly the daughter brightly suggests Pauline's church, where her school friend goes. But Pauline's Afro-Caribbean. O dear, Kate thinks, *no, I was thinking of a different sort of church.* But Molly insists, Pauline says its fun there. But Kate is not looking for a fun church. She wants a church where it is so low key that you can sit at the back in undisturbed peace and not feel threatened to join in. She just wants to listen. In truth what Kate wants is a *mild, doubtful liberal, possibly a youngish woman, who would give a sermon about some popular topic and then apologize for bringing up the subject of God.* And somewhere in all this Kate wants to be forgiven for her imperfections, and made to feel that just because she's not good like David the convert, she's not really a bad person. She doesn't think Pauline's more aggressive, fun church would do that for her because she thinks it would be the kind of church where **doubt is considered sinful.**

There follows the description of the actual church service they eventually discover around the corner. It is highly amusing and sadly rather close to the truth about many of our churches these days. But what I thought relevant to us this morning about this story is the place of doubt in the picture. It is not something that Kate thinks will be allowed a place in the more energetic, faith-filled service of her daughter's friend's Afro-Caribbean service. Doubt can only exist in the rather tepid, stale, agnostic atmosphere of a liberal Anglican service. There is also the relevance of Kate's dilemma. I believe that Kate, like many men and women today are confused about church and yet deeply anxious to find healing and wholeness. Where are they to find it? Is church just too threatening? Is church simply too pious, too good, too upright to allow doubt into its lifeblood? **How can we help the Kate's of Dundas/West Flamboro discover faith and forgiveness?** What do we need to become and do in order for this seeking of these confused and lost souls to be satisfied?

The interesting thing about the Thomas story is that doubt was obviously an issue for the church communities to whom this Gospel

was written. Why raise the issue of doubt if it wasn't a problem for them? Thomas becomes a sort of caricatured doubt figure in order for us to identify with his dilemma.

It is a dilemma that we all share. How are we to believe in a risen Christ, when the voices we hear say this is not possible? The voice of Thomas can be heard in the silent murmurs of many who sit in church. Doubt plays a critical role in the life of this early community of believers and the Thomas story is John's response to that doubt. John shows us that doubt does have a friendly face.

We have been living all week in a world that pays no attention to our biblical texts. All week we have heard from the technicians, the managers of our corporate, political establishments, from the new high priests of the age, the scientists: many if not most of them proclaim with authority that life is flat and has no spiritual reality behind it. These voices are in our ears all week. They sing different songs and play different tunes from the ones we hesitantly try to sing on Sunday morning. Is it any surprise that doubt eats away at our slender faith? Is it any wonder that doubt is celebrated and championed by the modern priests? The modern priests of science change Descartes' famous maxim to read: *I doubt, therefore I am.*

As Walter Brueggemann says in his book, **Finally Comes the Poet... *judged by the firm, settled, technical certitude of this age, or measured by the uncritical ideology of the world we take for granted, the world offered in the biblical tradition ...hardly has a claim to reality. It so little fits with the presumed world around us that the evangelical world of the tradition sounds like fiction.***

The encouraging note in this story is Christ's tender openness to Thomas' doubt. Christ beckons him into faith from his resolute doubt. Thomas' mind is made up that there is no possibility of faith in a risen Jesus until his doubts are answered. Christ, as he often does for us, opens that door for Thomas. His doubt is looked on by John's Gospel as the seedbed of faith.

There's a lovely description of this process that seems so universally true in Kathleen Norris' book **Amazing Grace**. She speaks about her

own struggles with doubt. Her experience in the Benedictine Abbey with the monks surprised her. She anticipated their concern with her weighty doubts about the faith. Instead, the monks seemed more interested in her desire to come to their worship services. She had thought that her doubts were a supreme obstacle to faith. Instead, she discovered that, ***doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.***

Growing into faith and feeling comfortable with weekly worship was never easy for Norris. She says that what helped her most was simply **repetition**. She says, ***worship itself thus became the major instrument of my conversion.*** In other words, it is in the act of listening again and again to the creeds, the hymns, the prayers, the sermons, that they slowly become, not the church's but ours. Faith is not mere intellectual assent to church language. Rather, as Norris reminds us, to believe simply means **"to give one heart to."**

Thomas, through his doubt arrived at a place where he could affirm again where his heart belonged. He confesses that Jesus Christ is his Lord, his God and bowed his life afresh to him. This is where doubt took him. It can take us there also. The prayer that echoes from the language of the New Testament ought to be our daily prayer, ***Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.***

Let me ask you this morning, do you think that you are the sole person listening to this service who is struggling with doubt? Are you alone hanging on to faith by your fingernails? Or perhaps is the truth rather that we all hanging on with you? Is Thomas the only disciple burdened with doubt, or perhaps the only one recorded for us? Or perhaps he is one of the few willing to come forward?

You and I can come forward. We are free to admit that the life of faith is difficult, that the voices that drown out our faith during our week are like a cloud of bees buzzing around our heads, and that faith seems to lie dormant somewhere deep inside us for long stretches. Is that true for you? Welcome pilgrim, you have joined the Thomas train to faith development. It is, as Norris says, repetition that is our hope. Through these weekly reminders, in and through the drama of worship, we are kept together. Norris again puts this beautifully:

***Over time, it was the ordinary events of life itself, coming “in between” the refrain of the church service, with its familiar creeds, hymns, psalms, and scripture stories, that most developed my religious faith. Worship summed it up and held it together...***

Anyone who claims that worship is unnecessary, or irrelevant to Christian faith, to my mind, is one who doesn't understand the Christian faith. Faith cannot survive in isolation. A Christian is, like Thomas, always in need of Christ's presence in community, always in need of the repetition of the church's language so that it might become ours. Easter faith feeds on this pattern of participation and repetition in worship and liturgy.

**Amen**