

EASTER TWO, YEAR C, APRIL 24, 2022

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no body. In the defense's closing statement the lawyer declared "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for all of you. He looked at his watch and said, "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A while later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty. "But how?" inquired the defense attorney. "You must have had some doubt, I saw all of you stare at the door. "The jury foreman replied: "Oh, we looked, but your client didn't."

Ah doubts! We all have doubts. In fact you can say we place a great deal of value on doubt. Just look at our judicial system. A person is considered innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. In courts of law, the benefit of the doubt is a good thing because it can sway a jury, even in matters of life and death.

In the same way, faith that is grounded, faith that is growing honors the value of doubt. Thomas comes to his expression of faith – "My Lord and my God!" only after expressing his doubts. Only after working through his misgivings does Thomas believe. This morning, we learn from Thomas that a living faith rarely comes without questioning and doubt. In fact, faith that is strong and vital is often the RESULT of questioning and doubt.

The presence of God in our midst is simply not a clear black and white thing for most of us on many days. Doubt is part of the equation. I want you to join me in holding up our doubts, in honoring our questioning minds. In this era when the black and white of fundamentalism of all sorts has such strong currency, it seems that the gifts of our questioning hearts and minds are frequently not honored. But it also seems to me that one of the enormous strengths of our Anglican tradition is our capacity to sit comfortably with uncertainty, to question and discern and hope together.

So often the world - secular and spiritual - seems to be presented in absolute and opposite terms. You're right or you're wrong. You're an enemy or an ally. You're saved or you're lost. You have faith or you have doubt. But the opposite of faith is not doubt. In fact, doubt is a catalyst for faith. The theologian, Frederick Buechner said, "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith." Our doubts are what move us to new places and cause us to dig deeper. Doubt is part of the process of seeking the truth. The opposite of faith is not doubt it is indifference. "Hardness of heart" is what Jesus calls it. When the disciples have doubts, Jesus does not disparage them as faithless or as untrusting. He encourages them to find out for themselves what their faith is made of.

Honest doubt is not a bad thing. For faith to be mature, it must be examined. For faith to be strong, it must confront real life. Authentic believers are those who are not afraid to confront God with their questions and deal honestly with their doubts. As one

theologian said, "The believer who has never doubted will hardly be able to speak to someone who has."

I think that doubt has a constructive and positive role to play in the exercise of faith. Churches are filled with persons who hold unresolved issues of faith and belief, but there is often no safety zone within our churches where these doubts can be raised and legitimized without the questioner being made to feel like a second-class Christian.

The writer Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that we don't come to church to be told certain facts, but to be open to possibility. I rather like that, and I think that is true. We don't come to worship to be told the way it is, we come to experience Christ for ourselves. We don't come to have religion plopped onto our plate in the cafeteria line of faith. We come so that as part of a community that seeks to live in Jesus' way, we can bring our fears and dreams, our needs and joys, our hurts and our praises and our uncertainty, all of it, before God so that in God's presence we find healing and hope and wisdom and strength for the journey. It's not about certainty so much as it is about relationship and about openness to God, a God that we do not fully know and a God that we cannot control.

God works in all kinds of ways to lead us to believe. Kurt Vonnegut was quite a religious skeptic, but he wrote in his last book of essays, published in 2005, "If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph: 'The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music.'" God speaks to us in all kinds of ways. Faith is not about mastering a set of facts, it is about a relationship.

That relationship comes from expressing doubts, from questioning and we could do so much more as a church if we were willing to express those doubts. Would you believe that we could help persons to see that faith is a belief held in the presence of doubts rather than a belief that removes all doubt?

Would you believe that we might discover persons willing to openly discuss their doubts in their individual struggles of faith?

Would you believe that we might be seen by unbelievers, not as folks who have all the answers, but as persons like themselves who hold a measure of faith despite our uncertainties?

Would you believe that we might give the church a more human face?

So, go ahead and ask: Is there really a God? Does it do any good to pray? Why should I go to church? If God is so good, then why is there so much evil in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? What does a man who died 2000 years ago have to do with me? Are science and religion opposed to each other? Question everything that you want too and question it again if you must.

Don't be afraid that your doubts or questions will destroy your faith. Faith is tough enough to withstand any doubt you may have. For two thousand years it has withstood every doubt and question hurled against it. I doubt if you can doubt anything that has not been doubted before. Don't be afraid of your doubts. Look right at them and name them. Because when you reach out to touch your doubts, you just may find God.

This is what Easter is all about. Easter is not a once-upon-a-time-this-crazy-thing-happened moment. Easter and resurrection and new life are continuing actions of God in the world. Jesus, through the actions of the Spirit in the world, continues to come to us and uses our doubts and questions to give us the hope we need in a broken world. So, remember doubts may not always lead to answers, but they almost always lead to growth in experiencing and developing a relationship where you just might find God. Amen.