



Sermon from 03/30/2008

Why We Believe ©

Texts: 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

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If anyone would have told me how hard going to school was, I probably never would have had an education.

If anyone would ever have told me how hard marriage can be at times – well – I may never have stood before the altar.

If anyone would have told me how hard it is to be a believer – well – I might never have become a Christian.

Why? Because life has snags!

This week I installed a fancy, new fanlight in our upstairs bathroom.

It was one of those jobs that required crawling around in the attic & breathing in insulation.

Well...when I went to fit the fan housing—guess what?

The support bracket opened & stretched perfectly across to the studs – the 2x4 – where it required anchoring, but on the other side of the unit, the height of the bracket was too high to connect to the 2x4.

So back to Lowes I went to buy wood to attach to the existing 2x4.

Up & down the ladder, on & off at the fuse box, back & forth to Lowes...working in a confined space...my back not completely recovered from shovelling snow—you know what I mean!

If I had only known that what the box carton touts as being (& I quote): an “easy installation” & that it would have take over five hours of sweat & aggravation, I might not have done it.

Why believe?

‘Cause now we have a very—as Candice Olsen likes to say—“*chick & functional*” ceiling light fan!

And I did it myself!

Why go through the hassle & bother of loving & raising kids & putting up with the heartache?

Why deal with an aging parent who needs extra care either physically, mentally or both?

‘Cause there’s only **you** that can do that job!

Now as anyone who’s done any DIY will tell you – whether it’s an installation or an improvement of some sort – there’s usually this threshold that you’ve gotta cross.

There’s usually this halfway point where you think, “*How did I get myself into this?*”

“Oh, this is gonna take more time than I thought, more money than I thought, more material than I thought, more emotion than I thought”— and all of a sudden the promise of the quick installation seems very hollow, indeed!

Wouldn't it be better just to bail out?

“O, Lord, I'm in over my head!”

“I better call the plumber, the electrician, the mechanic, the lawyer.”

And in some ways I think that's, in part, what's shaping these post-resurrection appearances of Jesus before His disciples.

You see when we celebrate the resurrection; we do it through the interpretive lens of living 2,000 years after the fact.

For US, the resurrection is glory, glory, and hallelujah!

But this morning I don't want you to forget that those first disciples went through – and the range of emotions they felt, the sleepless nights they had, the genuine fear they faced, and the reluctance they harboured.

For those first disciples, the resurrection wasn't trumpets blowing any fanfare.

The resurrection was Mary's tears at the empty tomb & her confusion about Jesus' lost body.

For the disciples it was the gripping thought of *“Are the authorities coming for me next?”*

That's why they're behind locked doors.

You see—while the resurrection is conclusion, victory, & triumph for US—for THEM it was a threshold...a halfway point.

It was the point of *“Oh, what have we got ourselves into here?”*

For me, as a Pastor, one of the features of our faith that makes Christianity credible is that when we read Scripture, we encounter an incredible range & depth of human feeling & emotion laid bare & raw before us.

Christianity—and Scripture never skirts, ignores or hides peoples' doubt & genuine disbelief & that's what makes it real for me!

And as Jesus appears—don't lose this—don't miss this—He appears at the threshold!

Say, “He appears at the threshold” with me.

When the disciples are possibly looking at “bailing out,” giving in, or getting the yellow pages out to call the nearest fix-it contractor—it's then that Jesus appears!

But here's the struggle, my friends, between faith & life.

At the crossroads are the everyday, mundane matters of life...and in those moments of difficult decision-making you have a choice: you can cry & weep & sob; you can hide yourself away (like Thomas who was conspicuous by his absence)¹ & kick yourself for having even started the project—or for having associated with the Dude.

¹ Psychologically, many people, when stressed—perhaps as Thomas was over the death of Christ—react by isolating themselves rather than staying engaged with the community. Isolation is often a symptom of intense, unresolved grief. At other times, some people withdraw from community to seek attention or to make a statement. For whatever motivated

You can heap anger & guilt upon yourself saying, “*Whom was I kidding to think that I could ever do this?*”

You can vacillate at the halfway point & lose your temper & start blaming others around you.

Or you can understand that there’s value in seeing the project through to its conclusion.

Jesus appears to the disciples ‘cause the resurrection is only the halfway point!

This week, along with my ceiling fan project we also had some plumbing issues—my favourite!

And it resulted in me having to change out one of our bathroom faucets.

As I said to someone this week, “*I am at my least holiest when I am working on plumbing.*”

But inside the Peerless bathroom faucet box was this rather curious—almost satirical—pamphlet & it said something like this: “*okay so you’re going to bang your finger—put a Band-Aid on it just & keep going!*”

Now I have an interpretation about the text before us today.

I know, I know—I should be saying something profound about Barack Obama & Rev. Jeremiah Wright or Hilary Clinton & Geraldine Ferraro, or John McCain & Pastor John Hagee...

...“our Pastor’s a smart guy...surely these are important issues, surely he should speak out, activate us, galvanize & politicise us & take a stand.”

Well, I’m sorry—maybe I’m a fool (maybe I’m not giving you the guidance you’re looking for from your Pastor), but these issues, trust me: “Here today, gone tomorrow” –just depending on what the media wants us to focus on.

But my faith—as you know from my fast from TV over Holy Week—isn’t media driven.

My faith is driven by what’s going on behind these locked doors in John’s Gospel.

My faith is driven by disciples at the threshold—cowering disciples at the moment of decision!

That’s what drives me!

And here’s what I think.

I don’t think Thomas was terminally “doubting Thomas”—he gets a bad rap for that.

I don’t think the Gospel wants to focus on exonerating Thomas either: “*Oh, man, now he’s “Believing Thomas!”*”

I think this Gospel passage wants us to feel the process of the tension that most of us tend to ignore in our faith!

You see, behind those locked doors they were ALL doubters—not just Thomas.

And we, too, are doubters and hypocrites in our culture.

Sure we boycott the “Bodies” exhibit at the museum ‘cause we think that the bodies are Chinese & possibly suffered human rights violations, but from the wood table in my kitchen to the juice in my refrigerator—all made in China...& I’m willing to bet that at least one item of clothing in your closet comes from there.

Thomas’ absence, Scripture does not supply a reason—we only know that Jesus was kind enough (because He loved Thomas) to make a second appearance to again to re-engage His relationship with Thomas.

All the men laughed when Mary came skipping in saying, *“I have seen the Lord!”*²

“Have you Darling?—*she’s hitting the bottle again!*”

They were ALL at the threshold!

Quivering, undecided, weak & wondering to do next!

They were all wondering whether they could go on.

They were all wondering if they could face jail or worse be hoisted high as Jesus was.

But Thomas is the first to try to get passed the anxiety of this middle ground between the promises that Jesus made while He was alive & the faith that is necessary to BELIEVE in those promises!

Listen, my friends, I know of people that stay stuck living with the anxiety of *“bail me out mode”* their whole lives!

They hear the promises of God, one after another after another—but the project doesn’t go as planned: it requires modification—it requires some Band-Aids & then the reluctance sinks in of *“Oh, what have I got myself into?”* or *“I don’t want to do this anymore!”*

But Thomas is the first to try—as imperfectly as he does—to move the promises of God into having faith in God.

He is the first to take a step forward.

He is the first to say, *“I’m going to keep trying!”*

He is the first to say, *“I’m not only going to challenge God to ‘step up’—I’m going to challenge myself, too.”*

I mean that was my very first prayer when I was a teen at my bedside: *“Jesus, if you really are who you say you are—show yourself to me”* & He did!

He didn’t write me off.

He didn’t punish me.

He didn’t say, *“Thomas what a fool you are—how dare you ask to seek my wounds!”*

He didn’t.

Now most of us labour under the trap of what I call the miraculous nature of the resurrection.

What I mean is we get caught up in the *“Wow, what a miracle!”* or *“How incredible!”* *“Isn’t it amazing!”*

But this is could be somewhat wrong or skewed.

Faith has less to do with the miraculous & more to do with that which is self-evidentiary.

What I mean is: most people get so caught up in seeking the miraculous, that they forget that God & faith are abundantly self-evident and do not require the “proof” of the miraculous.

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree?³

² John 20:18.

³ See Mark 11:13ff, Luke 13:6ff.

There was no fruit EVIDENT upon it, that's why!

When Jesus appeared to Thomas & the others, He didn't come chastising them, He didn't come preaching a sermon—He just came stood in their midst & said, "Peace" (that's to calm their anxiety) & "*Go ahead, touch me, put your finger in my side!*"

The resurrection isn't about glory, glory—it is about the Risen Christ who is standing right in front of you!

The second Sunday after Easter isn't sleepy, sleepy time.

Thomas challenged God & the thing you've gotta watch out for is this: ***If you challenge God, God will challenge you back!***

And God has one reason & one reason only to challenge us...and that's to turn the promises "**about**" Him into faith "**in**" Him.

Friends, the reason that Jesus appeared to the disciples wasn't for us to say, "Wow! We're all gonna live forever (*living forever that's just a little bonus we pick up along the way*)—the reason He appeared to them & the reason that He says, "*Blessed are those that have not seen & yet believe*"...

...the reason that Peter says, "***Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls***"⁴

...the reason why all this is said and done is because The 'Jesus Project' still requires completion.

And whom did God pick to finish the job He started: the paid professionals, the religious elite?

Hey, more often than not clergy just get in the way.

Hey, don't wait for me & the rendering of my scholarly opinion—you get busy—you go around me—God's work is on a timer & will probably get done more quickly & with greater heart & faith than with me blocking your run.

Don't get me wrong: I'm happy to do my part—but I'm not kidding myself—it's only a part, not the whole!

God doesn't pick professional believers to deal with embracing the self-evidence of faith.

Jesus chooses the common man & woman: the fisherman, the tax collector, the prostitute, and the person on the fringe to complete the work that He began!

Is there, my friend, a work of God that still requires completion?

Are there any that are hungry in Norwood?

Are there any that are poor in Norwood?

Are there any that are cold in Norwood?

The reason that the Christian faith makes these rhetorical questions is because the answers—just like our faith—is self-evident.

So why do you believe?

Is it because of the fanfare & the pomp?

⁴ 1 Peter 1:8-9, RSV.

Why are you here?

To hear the paid professional—Friends, I can only take you so far.

Are you here to nap, catch a few winks?

Friends, if you're tired and fall asleep in the House of God, what am I to think when you're not under your Pastor's watchful eye?

We believe that God's greatest work is still out there (not in here) & that each of us—young & old, rich & poor, black & white, all are called to feel His wounds, unlock the door, step outside & get the job done. Amen.

Questions For Reflection:

1. What is it that you find hard to do in your life & how is it that Jesus meets you in those places?
2. What is the job that only you can do?
3. How is the resurrection only the halfway point?
4. Are you at a halfway point...or have you passed the halfway point already?
5. What did you learn about yourself and God while being at the halfway point?
6. What is/are your threshold(s) that make you want to quit?
7. What is the value in seeing an aspect of your faith through to conclusion?
8. What is the trap of the miraculous nature of the resurrection?
9. What is self-evident in your faith?
10. Why are you here?

