

Message: "Navigating Holy Curveballs"

Scripture: John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

One of my favorite stories is about a very prominent, well-known philosopher of 18th century Scotland named David Hume. He is best known today for his highly influential system of philosophical [empiricism](#), [skepticism](#), and [naturalism](#). But you may also have heard of the label attached to him for his profound and extensive critique of religion, especially the institution and practice of the Christian faith. He was, for this reason, assigned the title "the great infidel," and was, by many, considered to be one of the strongest voices promoting atheism and agnosticism in his time.

The story I refer to was about a moment in time when David Hume, the great infidel, was seen coming out of a church, having attended a worship service. This caught the attention of a journalist who knew Mr. Hume quite well, and who was familiar with his distaste for anything religious, let alone Christian. So you can imagine this journalist's surprise that such a notable critic of the church was seen attending a service at a church - and he couldn't help asking Mr. Hume about this. "Excuse me, Mr. Hume," said the journalist, "But am I correct in that you just

came from a worship service in that church?" Mr. Hume replied, "Yes, indeed, I did. In fact, I now come fairly regularly." The journalist was intrigued, and asked, "Does this mark a change in your attitude toward the church? Do you now consider yourself a Christian?" Mr. Hume replied, "Oh no, I do not consider myself to be one at all." "Then," asked the journalist, "tell me, if you would, why do you attend such services?" "It's quite simple," replied the renowned philosopher, "I do not believe, but I find it good to be around those who do."

There's another similar story I love with respect to Mr. Hume, and it goes like this: "A friend once met him hurrying along a London street and asked him where he was going. Hume replied that he was going to hear George Whitefield preach. 'But surely,' his friend asked in astonishment, 'you don't believe what Whitefield preaches, do you?' 'No, I don't,' answered Hume, 'but he does. And that appeals greatly to me.'

Sometimes, for those who struggle with faith, or with God or metaphysics or transcendental reality for that matter - for those who struggle with faith, being around those who have faith - authentic faith, practical faith, loving faith - is a much needed elixir. Especially when things are tough; especially when the doubts seem greater than the belief.

Take, for example, this well-known passage which is where one disciple has earned the unfortunate title of "Doubting Thomas." I believe this is an unfair title; and I believe this is made clear simply by a focused reading of this passage. It is thought that Thomas was singled out for a lesser faith because he states "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." But read the text closely; the scene finds the rest of the disciples gathered together three days after Jesus had been killed; Thomas is not with them. They were huddled together in fear at the beginning of the passage; the text says that "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." So many questions arise naturally here - what was the nature of their fear? That the Jews would do the same to them as they did to Jesus if they were discovered? That they would be chased out of town? That they would be taken to court? That they would have to deny Jesus in order to be accepted as authentic Jews? Were they not doubting as well? But a more direct reason for their convalescence behind the locked door

would seem obvious, for anyone who knows what it's like to be terribly frightened knows how much better it makes things to not be alone.

But yet an even bigger question exists: namely, where was Thomas? It is thought that he had flown the coup in fear, that he had gotten away from Jerusalem and as far away from the danger as possible, and that is why he was not with the disciples - but Thomas was obviously still around; once Jesus had appeared and said, "Peace be with you" to the disciples, it seems as if the disciples rather quickly informed Thomas of the event. So where was Thomas? Was he cowering in fear close by, in isolation somewhere, hiding out until the danger receded? Or could there be another explanation, as some scholars propose - that, as the rest of the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors, he was out there, in the dangerous alleys and roadways of Jerusalem, searching for Jesus - the resurrected Jesus, that is? Could it not be that he insisted on visible evidence because his faith was so strong it couldn't stand to doubt, and he was desperate to meet in person the Jesus he knew was very much alive? Maybe in his mind second-hand witnesses would not do, especially by those commanded by fear and thus may not be the most reliable witnesses.....might this not have been why he wanted evidence that came directly from God?

I'm belaboring this point because this story highlights an aspect of our human frailty that is universal and troubling, and very evident in our world today as we cast our vision towards media misinformation, intentional fabrications for political gain, and distrust of facts and empirical data regarding things like climate change and vaccine efficacy. It is the tendency for humans to try to create reality out of their own desires, rather than face what is really going on. This is called "projected hope delusionality" and, no, you won't find that term in a medical journal or psychological text, for I made it up last night! But that phrase seems to fit what we see going on in our world today, where we dwell upon what we hope will happen to the point that we convince ourselves, often against reason, that it is actually happening or has already happened but not been noticed or understood. There are many bad examples of this out there presently, such as presidential election result deniers, or conspiracy theory pundits, where the hopes of certain individuals did not pan out, but the hope was so strong that they retain the lie even in the face of incontrovertible evidence against that lie. People will believe

anything if they place everything in their hopes - and this can be a very bad thing indeed.

But it can be a good thing if what they hope for does not seek to defy reality but clarify and reinforce what is real, as faith should always seek to do. The doubts of Thomas are so often understood as testimonies of a weak or shallow faith, but could it not have been his doubts which drove him from the safety of the locked doors to seek out the God whom he knew was out there somewhere, the God whom he met in Jesus, the God which he desperately wanted to experience again and again and again? If not acted upon, his doubts may have become his undoing, so he searched in the best way he knew how - but perhaps didn't count on the possibility that God was also searching for him. In other words, Thomas may be the disciple whose faith was actually strong enough to risk searching for God in a hostile world; he was determined to work on his faith, rather than wait for things to develop.

For some people, faith seems to come pretty easy. I don't know about you, but such people tend to drive me crazy, for my faith has never come easy. But there are some who seem to have found the sweet spot in their relationship with God. They seem to have no doubts, they seem to be quite composed in their belief, they appear to not have the same struggles as the rest of us. You know - the kind of people who drive you nuts? They seem to have it all together - "seem" being the key word here. They might indeed be people of strong faith, but they also may not be engaged with the real incarnation we have been given in Jesus, for the incarnation of God in Jesus is the equivalent of a holy curveball God has thrown in our direction. Jesus was not the Messiah most people expected; mystical transformations and miraculous healings and wise teachings are all good if God had kept it within those parameters, but God had no intention of making our faith journey a thing of easy bliss. In Jesus we have a prioritization of the poor and an insistence upon humility and a counter-cultural emphasis upon generosity and compassion and an expectation that faith must pursue justice and must strive to love those who hate us.....and in Jesus, we have a crucified messiah which no one really predicted nor wanted of their God. It can be very hard to follow such a figure as Jesus, the real Jesus that we have in scripture. It would be much easier to follow a God of our own design, which I believe is quite common in the world of

Christianity; we often make God into something of convenience for our lives, prioritizing what we want to be true about God rather than accepting what was revealed in Jesus. No, I actually don't understand an easy faith; I don't think God ever intended such a thing.

That is why this story of the disciples cowering in fear behind locked doors, and a disciple demanding proof of God's resurrected son, is so important to those of us who struggle with our faith. All of the disciples struggled to understand and accept what God revealed back then, not only in the resurrection, but in the life experiences of Jesus they saw first-hand. Countless times they questioned what he was doing or teaching; many times they demonstrated their cluelessness about God, about truth, about forgiveness, about love. Betrayals, deceit, arrogance, dismissal, disbelief, and all sorts of wrongness peppered their journey with Jesus. But Jesus loved them all the same, and entrusted the future of the organized faith to them. In the disciples, Jesus demonstrated God's preference for the imperfect - which is good news for all of us!

So this morning, I have a few suggestions to leave you with. Let us consider revising our perception of Thomas, not as one with weak faith, but one whose faith drove him to search more passionately for the God revealed in Jesus. Let us consider revising our sense of the disciples being misfits and stumblers, seeing them rather as ones caught up in the riskiest of mysteries, willing to believe and trust where others sought an easier way. Let us see ourselves in the disciples, Thomas included, when we struggle with our faith, trusting against common sense or social convention that God can make a way where the world cannot, that Jesus is with us in each other as we abide in his Body, and that honest doubting and questioning are essential parts of an authentic faith.