

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2012
Lessons: Psalm 94:1-15 and John 20:24-29

FAITH AS HEALING

Thomas is the holdout. He refuses to accept the word of his fellow disciples that Jesus, who was executed by crucifixion, has been raised by God to new life. Thomas requires not only seeing Jesus alive but touching him to be sure that what he sees is real. We, of course, can do neither, and it is our situation that the Gospel of John addresses here at its climax. “Have you believed,” Jesus asks his holdout disciple, “(only) because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” He’s speaking about us – all of us who have come to believe in the truth of the risen Christ even though we are not eyewitnesses to his resurrection. We have not seen or touched him, but we put our faith in him, entrusting our lives and destinies to the redemptive love of God that unites us with Jesus and gives us hope for sharing in his resurrection – his newness of life – now in this world and forever in the world to come.

Don’t be a “Doubting Thomas,” we say to someone being skeptical of something we believe, and down through the centuries of church history, this reluctant disciple has been branded “Thomas the Doubter.” I have a question, and the answer is not simple or one-sided. Is doubt harmful or helpful, a bad thing or a good thing, an offense to God or an opportunity for God to reach us?

We actually teach our children to doubt, and life teaches them to doubt even more. Magic shows with their illusions and sleight-of-hand tricks teach children that seeing ought not always to be believing. I remember a boy in my second grade class who told such tall tales that the teacher grew concerned, but he also liked to try to trick other kids into believing something foolish so he could laugh at them. Early one evening after the workers had gone home, I went, as a seven-year-old boy will, to inspect the construction of a new house in our neighborhood. That boy and another came along, and, however it may have been that our talk turned to boxing or fighting, he told me in what even then I recognized as a sneering tone, that to make a fist the right way I should tuck my thumb into my fingers. “Do that,” he said, “and you’ll knock out that extra tooth.” That’s my earliest memory of thinking of someone, “Liar.”

Doubt can be protective. If had tried that boy’s method by punching something with my fist made that way, I would have hurt my thumb, maybe even sprained it. Doubt also

works hand-in-hand with curiosity to teach us critical thinking and problem solving. Without the power of doubt, we would still think the earth to be flat and salamanders to be born in flames. But is doubt the enemy of faith?

To seek an answer, we must first of all and very importantly for our life as individual Christians and as a church, learn to distinguish faith from certainty or, I might better say, from *certitude*, which describes unquestioning acceptance of truisms. Certitude is not faith. What is certain requires no faith and leaves no room for faith or doubt. Let's be trivial for a moment to make the point clearly. When I am standing in a downpour getting soaked, I no longer need faith in the forecast that predicted rain; neither do I need any longer to doubt the forecast that predicted a dry, sunny day. "Faith," the Bible says, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." At its core, faith is not just belief but trust. It's relational – trust in someone who cares for us, who loves us.

But what is the purpose of Christian faith? What does it do for us? For too long, people have been led to think that the purpose of faith is to get us into heaven when we die. No, God's grace and only God's grace will give us eternal life with God. We will never deserve it for having been good people, and we will never deserve it for having faith in Jesus Christ. Deserving has nothing to do with it. But getting into heaven is not the purpose of faith anyway, because faith is not the means to an end but an orientation toward God that commits us to God's will for human life and the life of all creation. From Jesus, we learn that God's will is for the triumph of redemptive love over all that hurts, corrupts, and destroys life. People love power; God loves justice. People seek the best for themselves and their own; God seeks healing, wholeness, and abundant life for all. People exploit and then discard the earth's resources and each other; God made us to be stewards of the earth and sisters and brothers who care for each other.

Faith is a matter of entrusting ourselves to God's redemptive love for us and for all. It's a response to love that becomes an orientation toward life, others, and self. Faith generates a willingness and even a desire to be transformed by God's love as we learn from Jesus to see life and people God's way and to want for them as well as for ourselves what God wants for all of us.

Too often, Christianity is preached as a magical means for getting what we want from God: blessings of health and happiness now, success in our chosen endeavors, and heaven later. Faith reorients me from what I want toward what God wants, as I learn to trust God more than I trust anyone or anything else, including myself. Magical religion would judge God by how well my plans work out and my desires come to fruition. If believing keeps me safe and empowers me to prosper without demanding too much of my time, thought, and

effort, then of course I will believe. But when believing proves inconvenient or fails to pay off as I desire, then I begin to doubt.

Does strong faith take away all my doubts? No, but it changes their nature, purpose, and direction. Doubt can be either helpful or harmful. When tied to disappointment, resentment, and shame, doubt becomes corrosive. It sours my spirit as it pushes God and other people away. Having been disappointed, I will not trust again. I will not entrust my hopes to the God I now doubt cares about me. Corrosive doubt works from mistrust. Thomas does a very quick turnaround when Jesus confronts him because he wants to believe but until then has not been willing to let himself risk believing again. Faith always risks disappointment, but then so does hope and so does love. Jesus never said it would be easy to follow him. Life is not fair, and the systems that run human life in this world certainly are not fair. Nothing about the employment picture these days is fair nor even designed to be fair or have much regard for people. The education systems are not fair. Our economic systems are not fair. Our political process is not fair. For unpopular minorities, these systems have never been fair or meant to be fair. Their injustices have been deliberate all along, talking about equal opportunity but making sure it never happened. Now the systems have been turned against almost everyone. So, we live in a swamp of toxic, corrosive doubt.

Christian faith has much to offer people mired in this swamp, but let us be clear about the nature of what Jesus Christ has entrusted to us to offer them. Not certitudes! Rather, a God who really does love us – all of us – and does want far better for us than we have yet envisioned. But we cannot coopt God’s love into our closed systems of selfishness, greed, and hostility toward others. If we expect Christian faith simply to pay off as we wish, we will be disappointed by it.

Faith heals the human spirit by loosening the grip of self so we can respond to God’s redemptive love. Why the adjective, *redemptive*? I’ll tell you why. God’s love works to change us, not just accept us and leave us as we are. Faith is a commitment to being changed, not just comforted and affirmed. There is nothing benign about God’s love for us. It is angry, frustrated, almost ferocious love that has no intention of giving up on us and this world but will not use force and fear to get its way.

Thomas is not merely convinced by Jesus but healed. Entrusting ourselves to the truth of God’s redemptive love heals the wounds and burns life has inflicted upon our spirits. Faith does not put an end to our doubting but brings it back into partnership with curiosity, wonder, and trust instead of disappointment, bitterness, and suspicion. That is healing. Faith enables us to risk hoping and loving and letting ourselves be loved. If that’s not healing for the human spirit, then I don’t know what healing is. Amen.