

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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Thomas said, "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." – **John 20:19-31**

## **Living Beyond Fear and Doubt**

Last Friday, a hockey team with their coaches and support staff boarded a bus in Humboldt, Saskatchewan and set out for their playoff game in Nipawin. Practically every day on the prairies, there are dozens of buses transporting teams to hockey and football games, school field trips, band concerts and festivals, and dozens of other activities. Given the conditions in which buses often travel, through snow and rain and sleet, it is amazing that there are not more accidents. But on this occasion, as you all know, they never made it.

Those who boarded that bus when it left Humboldt thought they were as safe as could be imagined. And so did their parents and the adopted families they lived with in Humboldt. Those families put them on the bus in the full confidence that they would safely arrive in Nipawin. No one expected what happened. The chances of it happening were miniscule.

The reality is that none of us are ever completely safe. Life is insecure. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? Probably no one is more aware of that than the parents of young children. Nothing makes you more vulnerable than to love another, and when the one you love is a small, vulnerable child, your heart is vulnerable. When my daughter was four years old, I got a phone call to do a funeral for a little four-year-old girl who had been killed accidentally. I never knew this little girl but it was probably the most excruciating funeral I have ever done, because I did not want to believe that four-year-olds were so vulnerable. The knowledge that four-year-olds are vulnerable made me acutely aware of my own vulnerability.

My children are now in their late twenties and thirties, but I still worry about them. I worry about the economy and how they will make a living. I worry about the impact of climate change and what the environment will be like for them and their children and grandchildren. I worry about their health and their relationships and whether they text while driving. I worry about the stability of political leaders in the United States and Russia and Syria and North Korea and whether the latest crisis will escalate into something horrifying. I am a person of faith, but my faith is not naive. I know that (excuse my language) "shit happens." Life is uncertain, and that uncertainty can be terrifying. That is the reality of life. But how do we deal with that uncertainty?

The short answer is that it takes courage. Four centuries before Christ, the Greek philosopher Aristotle said that courage is the golden mean between two extremes, between the extreme of

foolish bravado and the extreme of foolish timidity. A person who feels no fear, ever, is a foolish person. A healthy fear of traffic, for example, teaches us to look both ways before we cross the street. A healthy fear of gravity teaches you to acquire certain skills before you point your skis or your board down a steep hill. But without pushing the boundaries of our fears, we could never cross the street, or learn to negotiate a ski hill. A person who is overwhelmed by fear will never really be able to live, to do a good job of parenting, or to face any insecurity. To live life with courage means to acknowledge the things that scare us, and to choose how we will respond to our fears. That is the only way to experience real, abundant life.

When the stone was rolled away from Jesus' tomb, the first disciples gradually came to realize that all the things that caused them fear, no longer had power over them. They could be afraid, and not be overwhelmed by their fear. They could face persecution, suffering, even death, without immobilizing fear.

This Easter faith also helps us to deal with our doubts and questions. Life is unsettling, and it is natural to have doubts and questions in response to being unsettled. As we grow up, we learn from our parents and teachers a way of seeing the world, but no way of seeing the world is adequate to its complexity and uncertainties. We learn a way of living, but then the market crashes, or the tumour is revealed, or the child grows sick, or the river floods, or the professor challenges all that we held dear, and all that we had built our lives on is thrown into question. Doubt and confusion is a natural part of life. Without the grace of doubt, we would grow rigid and unbending, arrogant and uncompromising. Without doubt, we never change, grow or develop. Acknowledging our doubts helps us learn the virtue of humility. Without humility, we cannot entertain new ideas or offer hospitality to those whose experience is different, to people of different generations or ethnic origins, of different sexual orientation or life philosophies.

But doubts can also be immobilizing; when we make doubt a way of life, when we grow cynical and negative, we are unable to commit to anything because we have no sense of what life is for, of what is worthy of our devotion, of our time, our energy, our life. A life immobilized by doubt is ultimately one which is lived without purpose, conviction, trust or hope.

When the stone was rolled away from Jesus' tomb, the first disciples came to realize that they could live with confusion and doubt without being immobilized by it. They still had doubts, as the story of doubting Thomas acknowledges quite clearly, but beyond their doubts they were able to recognize a truth that went beyond their intellectual questions and touched their deepest intuitions about the meaning of life. They recognized that life, at its heart, is about love. They recognized that God is love, and that whoever lives in love, lives in God. By placing their trust in a God of love, they found that they could live with their doubts, without allowing their doubts to immobilize them.

Fear, confusion, doubt are all natural parts of life. In their place, they help us to be more compassionate, humble and hospitable. But when they become a way of life, they become immobilizing, they can trap us in a tomb of our own making.

And so, we celebrate baptism. Baptism is our way of welcoming people, of any age, into a way of life in which fear, confusion and doubt are present, but do not have the last word. We do not suppress them, but we transcend them. We live with them, without allowing them to overcome us.

And so it is that we can roll along the uncertain highways of life—not knowing what dangers lurk around the next corner—with trust, with faith, and with courage, because we know that we are surrounded by a love that is stronger than death and illumined by a light that is greater than darkness. Amen.