

Second Sunday in Easter, 2021

Christ Church Gabriola, B.C.

Rev. Dr. Linda A. St.Clair

“Saved by Doubt Through Faith”

Brothers and sisters, friends of God,
How joyful and pleasant a thing it is
Like the gathering of a mountain range-
When we dwell together in unity.

Today’s gospel describes a gathering of disciples who have yet to find their way to be in unity about what happened to Jesus after he was crucified. They are still, according to the writings of John, in the “upper room” and the door is shut. Perhaps even those who have “seen” the Risen Christ are still stunned and fearful of their own people who were like a mob let alone the occupied forces of the Roman Empire. We, who come out of a Christian history racked with the sufferings of the Reformation know that these internal struggles are terrible...our ongoing human problem—fearing & fighting one another!

The heart of today’s story, however, seems to me to be about Thomas’ reaction to stories about Jesus’ resurrection. Over years he has been labeled as the Doubter, Doubting Thomas—interesting enough Peter never got labeled Peter the Denier!

But this questioning moment is not the end of Thomas’ story, it is just part of his journey. For me, it is a hopeful sign, a sign of his deep faith, strong enough that he was willing to pursue his question even while wondering if the news of the resurrection could be true.

The song “Keep the faith” written by Victor Anthony, who was one of Gabriola’s beloved musicians and song writers speaks to this for me. The closing verse goes something like this:

Some things just are
And some things will be
I don't know, it's a mystery
Once thing for sure I swear it true
You gotta have faith, it will see you through
Keep the faith, it will see you through. (1)
Those words ring a bell for me...

Or, hear the words that Tennyson wrote:
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds. (2)

Historians and biblical scholars have given us more accurate data today on the meanings or the wordings of the ancient texts we have about Jesus' life. There is clear consensus that he lived out/he acted out, words he spoke, he walked the talk. His advocacy for the poor, the disenfranchised, the sick, the widow and orphans and the foreigner were clear. He sought to liberate them from exclusion and with compassionate healing. He demonstrated that they were also Children of God. (A short course on the Beatitudes summarizes the words that marked Jesus' practice.)

So, here we are today, maybe imagining ourselves sitting or standing with those who have been following Jesus— listening to him, talking to him, watching him, working with him and yet, leaving him when he was arrested, tried, crucified and taken to be buried.

In John's gospel, we are told that Jesus did many other signs as the Risen Christ. For me, it is really significant that never once was it reported that Jesus admonished/criticized anyone for abandoning him, rather he greeted them with love and with signs of peace and fellowship. It seems he was seeking to empower

them to move forward in faith, to continue the work he had begun. Faith can move us forward, sometimes to actual physical activity along with a deep spiritual commitment/or yearning. It calls for more than a verbal testimony of “I believe...” as being enough!

As we gather today, we and millions of others, have experienced months of being sequestered away in our own “upper rooms” and often feeling bereft. There is an actual, real distance that existing between us and our loved ones, our families and friends and we miss the contact. No-one I know, decided they wanted months and months and months of “alone time”.

So, what makes this kind of existence tolerable? We realize, as the Risen Christ demonstrated, that moving into blaming someone, anyone, even ourselves is not what it is needed nor is it helpful. But the antidote, I think, Christ Church Gabriola Is already implementing. In unity, even though loosely coupled in these COVID times, you’ve discovered visible, practical and safe ways of reaching out to one another, to the “other,” whoever that might be, to assure them, that you are there and that you care. Many ways have been found or rediscovered: increased phone calls to say hello; or calls to check to see if something is needed; often things are “dropped off”; a note or card is posted; an email sent; a new on-line program is developed to connect folks with interesting topics; sometimes someone stands outside or beeps their horn, just to let you know, they are there. And prayers swirl around folks supporting them in hard times. Molly’s birthday deserves an honorable mention. And of course we Zoom.....a new word in the vocabulary for many of us. There is so much more I am sure...but even from here I know about these.

Perhaps one of the side gifts in this time is the challenge of creatively practicing our faith journey as followers of the Risen Christ. The footprints of Jesus’ ministry are very clear and don’t need much deciphering. What is that old saying/hymn...”they will know we are Christians by our love?” What we do and how we do it!

In high school (back in the dark ages) I was a finalist in a speech contest whose topic was Albert Schweitzer, recently awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. I read his book, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," and the closing lines have stayed and sustained me through the years. It was confirming as I re-read Bishop Richard Holloway's, (former Primate of the Church of Scotland) book, "Doubts and Loves" that he chose this for the closing lines in his work as well.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer demonstrated his conviction that the practice of practical love vs talking about the religion of love was the call. He became a medical missionary working in challenging conditions in Lambarene, Africa. He was no longer just talking about Jesus but trying to follow him.

Some of the closing words that still inspire me:

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakes side as he came to those who knew Him not...He speaks to us the same words "Follow thou me!" ...He will reveal Himself in the toils, conflicts, the sufferings which we shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they(we)shall learn in their(our) own experience Who he Is."

And I have found that doubts like those of Thomas are not one-time events, they will come and go but with faith and acts of love, they drift away and find us filled with gratitude for all that has and will be in His service... the Risen Christ. Amen.

1. Jim Cotter, Psalm 133, Towards the City, A Version of Psalms 101-150, Cairns Publications, Sheffield , 1993.
2. Victor Anthony, "Keep the Faith," Album: Mystery Loves Company, 2015.
3. Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam. A.H.H. Canto 96.
4. Richard Holloway, Doubts and Loves. Canongate Books, Edinburgh, 2001, p.250

