

Lawrence Park Community Church – April 16, 2023, Easter 2

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Eric Bacon

*Doubt has its place in the journey of faith*

Scripture: John 20: 19 - 31

The season of Easter is a particularly special time to occupy a pulpit and that is my privilege this morning. Over a period of fifty days, we once again address a story that we know so well. And so, the question, or perhaps the dilemma from the preacher's standpoint is what could possibly be a new take on the story, or part thereof, in order to engage a congregation in 2023? Easter is a season of new life and growth, not only in nature, but in our spiritual lives. We have already made the journey from Palm Sunday to that rich poignant moment when Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus at the empty tomb, having first mistaken him for the gardener. Her words that morning became a declaration that has rang out over the centuries; *I have seen Jesus*. By virtue of our claim to be followers of Jesus, we belong to the millions of Christians who share in such a moment of recognition because, in some way unique to each individual, we have at some point in our lives experienced the significance of the person of Jesus and his teachings for our living. Hence the saying that *Christ lives within us!* Yes . . . you may say that that expression belongs in the evangelical arena of Christendom, and I make no apology. It serves to acknowledge that we have embraced the *Way* of Jesus, the characteristics that defined his life; unconditional love, acceptance, forgiveness. kindness, empathy, humility, and mercy. A high bar from which we occasionally fall by just being human.

Today we begin to look at what are referred to as post-resurrection stories which have changed and continue to change lives, events that speak to the power of transformation through an encounter with Jesus.

Let me say at the outset that we do not need to dwell on the unexplainable nature of these happenings as, in doing so, I believe that we lose part of the mystery. To be more specific, if we get caught up on the question of physical resurrection then we lose the deep meaning of these stories. Our quest and that of anyone who stands in this pulpit is to get to the heart of the matter in the story. I recall a statement from a New Testament professor who, at the commencement of the semester, said that the authors of the gospels took an ordinary happening and embellished it to become an extraordinary happening. They did so to accentuate its significance. That powerful statement has informed my personal theology and approach to preaching ever since. I ask you to keep it in mind as we consider today's gospel story.

This morning I want to look at the subject of *doubt* in a positive way because I do not know of anyone who is free of doubt in this endeavour we call faith and as such it cannot be ignored. The days of taking the view that people forming a congregation on a Sunday morning leave their intellect at the door are over but doubts are always welcome.

Today Clara read a familiar and poignant story from the Gospel of John, the one which features the disciple Thomas who has since that event unfairly borne the mistaken stigma of *doubting* Thomas.

As I look back, I have intersected with Thomas on several occasions. In fact, I believe that he lurks in the background as an inspiration. Thomas became a cornerstone in my questioning faith simply because he was honest enough to openly express his doubts. As such, for me, he is a person of integrity and courage and whose example can be a source of encouragement. One of my encounters with Thomas was in preparation for ministry in the United Church, a process which is both long and, if I may say so, sometimes repetitive and tedious. It is a process of filling in endless forms, being interviewed repeatedly, questioned, tried and tested. In retrospect that is no doubt all necessary in order for us to know what we are really getting into! One of the interesting questions we are asked in this process is, *With what person in the Scriptures do you most identify and why?* Perhaps in my paranoia I thought that this was a trick question and a wrong choice might terminate my journey to ordained ministry! Well, Thomas surfaced once again in my mind and I wrote down my response without hesitation. I was prepared to take the risk that if the United Church wanted its ministry personnel to possess faith without doubts, then I would have to pursue another vocation. The reason for my choice will become evident.

This morning I want to briefly examine the character of Thomas, by suggesting the ways in which many of us can identify with him and what we can learn from him. The gospel account tells us that Thomas was not with the other disciples when they experienced that intense presence of Jesus within themselves. And so, when he heard his colleagues saying, *We have seen Jesus!* Thomas found it far too good to be true. He said to them,

*“Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe it”*. If we had been there at the time, I am inclined to think that Thomas would not have been alone in his unbelief. This is understandable because I suspect that the world would have been no different than today with its insistence on an attitude of *show me* or *let me see for myself*. We heard earlier how the story proceeds when, a week later, Thomas was with the rest of the disciples in what we were told was a locked room.

The opening of Thomas’ mind is recorded in dramatic terms. The Gospel writer describes Thomas’ experience in extraordinary terms. He has an encounter with the risen Jesus in which he is invited to see and feel for himself. In the modern idiom we could say that Thomas has a *moment of clarity*. He utters words of recognition, *My Lord and my God*. Today he may have simply said, *Now I get it!* In that very personal moment, in whatever form it took, he is caused to stop doubting and begin believing. The moment of truth has arrived for Thomas.

Jesus’ response are words that we can claim for ourselves. He said to Thomas: *“Have you believed because you have seen me.? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”*. You and I have not seen but we have some semblance of belief along with our doubts.

The late Reverend Paul Gibson, an Anglican professor at Trinity College expands on the subject of doubt by saying that *“the opposite of faith is not doubt but cynicism and*

*despair. The opposite of doubt is not faith but credulity ...i.e., a willingness to believe the unbelievable.*” Gibson then goes on to say that *“Faith needs the refining quality of questions born of doubt.”* In making this statement Gibson raises the concept of doubt about something worthy and necessary. If this morning you only remember this statement, then you have the very essence of this entire reflection.

There are other reasons that I can identify with Thomas. Let me mention two of them. First, he absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. The late Dr. William Barclay, author, theologian and a good friend to newly ordained ministers because of his helpful Bible commentaries. Barclay says of Thomas that *“There is an uncompromising honesty about him. He would never still his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. He was not the kind of man who would rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about. Thomas had to be sure. There is more ultimate faith in a person who insists on being sure than persons who glibly repeat things which they have never thought out, and which they may not really believe.”* This may sound somewhat judgmental on the part of Barclay but I truly believe that a vital aspect of faith is the need for us to take responsibility for it. It cannot be like a package that we simply accept because someone in the pulpit said that we had to and that thousands of others have already done so through the ages.

Second, Thomas showed us that when he was sure, he went the whole way. That moment of clarity ... that meaningful encounter in which he integrated Jesus into his being, brought him to a personal declaration, *My Lord and my God!* or expressed another way, *I*

*now understand what all this meant!* I don't think that after this moment Thomas would have been doubt free. Rather he had established a sufficient faith foundation on which to build. That is where you and I are today. We have experienced a moment of recognition that Jesus has meaning for us. That establishes a faith, subject to growth and maturity.

Paul Gibson says that *"faith is a life-style, however inadequately adopted; it is what the early Christians called a way, a way of life defined by a story and a person."* Let us remind ourselves this morning that the *Way of Jesus* existed before the church, before human constructed doctrines and creeds, growth of denominations, and human imposed regulations and rules of entry. All of which have served to almost bury a simple idea of living in authentic relationships. Jesus Christ invites us to follow him in an uncomplicated but responsible way.

Thomas at first refused to believe what his fellow disciples had told him. But he still stuck with them and they stuck with him. A UCC ministry colleague remarked to me that this is kind of like the church. We're all at different levels and stages of faith (and doubt) but we stick it out together as a faith community. There is something very good about hanging in there for one another. None of us can journey alone.

I believe that Thomas' integrity can speak to all of us today in whatever stage of faith and doubt we may find ourselves. Easter affords us an opportunity to rediscover the essence of Jesus. May this be so for all of us this morning.

Amen.

