Seeing and Believing

**John 20: 19-31**

** You have probably seen this image before… what do you see up on the screen?

Some of you will see a rabbit, and some will see a duck. A very few – once you point out the illusion – still can only see one or the other. And for most, once you’ve seen both, you can easily switch your viewpoint; you can, then, see either one; see it either way.

I’ve been reading this week the honest statements of a number of people who, in their faith journeys, identify strongly with the disciple named Thomas – or, as we’ve come to know him – “Doubting Thomas”. The inability of this disciple to immediately grasp what others embraced through faith (i.e., the fact that Jesus literally rose from the dead) apparently, is comforting to many people. One of those persons – a pastor, actually – used this duck/rabbit optical illusion as a teaching point explaining her own questioning nature…

*For most of my life, I could only see the duck. I interpreted everything that happened around me and within me as acts of God. He was the only explanation for how the world came to be, how people managed to be good to one another, how believers had religious experiences, how things always worked together for good, how the Bible spoke to me, how the day after I prayed for this or that I just happened to receive this or that.*

*I looked at the pattern and saw only a duck. How anyone could see anything else was simply beyond me. It was a duck—plain and simple.*

*Then one day I saw the rabbit. It happened rather suddenly and it startled me. In one shocking moment, just as clearly as I could see the duck, I could see another pattern that explained the world: chance, wishful thinking, self-delusion, self-centeredness, superstition, fear, projection, science, psychology, coincidence, power plays, politics.*

*It’s not that I stopped seeing the duck. It’s just that once I saw the rabbit, the picture made sense both ways.*

She goes on to say that her point is this,

“...telling me that there’s no rabbit isn’t going to help. Telling me to ignore the rabbit isn’t going to help. Telling me that I’m a sinner for seeing the rabbit isn’t going to help. It would be like me demanding that you look at the picture above and only see one creature.

I’m not saying that those of us who see the rabbit are better or smarter than those who don’t. I’m just saying that, for me, doubt is not some concerted act of the will that I can suddenly stop. Sure, I can focus on one way of interpreting the world and nurture the side of me that is quick to perceive the spiritual, but the rabbit will always be there, making another picture out of the pattern.*

*(Rachel Held Evans)*
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Then I found another pastor who shared this:

While serving my last church, I visited a widowed 84-year-old church member who was admitted to an intensive care unit for a rapid heart condition. I asked her if she had experienced any major problems just prior to being hospitalized. Mildred uttered softly “Well, Pastor, my dog died a few days ago and I dread stepping through my front door and not being met by him. My husband, as you know, passed away two years ago.” She was silent for a time and then with misty eyes she mumbled, “I think God may no longer be in control and I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

I asked if she might say more about that but she was unable to respond. Initially I figured the tears had to do with the grief over her husband and pet but my hunch was she may have been weeping over the fact she had just stopped believing in an omnipotent God. Her theology, or lack of it, may have put her in ICU. If she had held throughout her entire life to an image of an invincible, commanding, transcendent Godhead and suddenly that assurance vanished, her fear in her dying days might have had to do with facing a disappointed and possibly an angry Creator.

How many of our congregants gradually and quietly stop believing in an all-powerful Architect? They may remain silent in church until their last breath because they fear their pew partners and pastors believe firmly and unwaveringly an all-powerful God and would not understand. They fear condemnation and exclusion if they were honest with their doubts, and so they sit in the pew (or don’t), spiritually isolated from other sometimes-believers with whom they might have shared and grown.

Now, I realize that this kind of conversation may make some of us … uncomfortable. We don’t want to hear about doubts – especially from pastors. And from the pulpit! We like assurance. In fact, one of the theological emphases of John Wesley (i.e., the things that make the Methodist church distinct from other Christian denominations) is our emphasis on what Wesley called “assurance”. And what Wesley meant by that was his deep seated belief that not only was he certain of his own salvation – based on a rock solid belief in the saving work of Jesus Christ, but he was just as convinced that every Christian could know that same assurance. Its one of our foundational doctrines as United Methodists.

Wesley firmly believed that this was a function – the work – of the Holy Spirit. To bring assurance. (Which, by the way, when we sing, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine…” that’s what it’s talking about! That kind of assurance. I hope you knew that!)

Now, having said that, I have to admit that while I tend to question at times all my beliefs (I think that’s a healthy thing), I am not a doubter by nature. So, I too, share Wesley’s conviction of the possibility of assurance. We can know who we are. We can know whose we are. We can know where we are bound (eternally)… I believe that every person can know these things.
But I’ve been in ministry too long to not also know that the kind of people that these two pastors were describing are found in every church. Including right here, this morning. (Or, as the second pastor mentioned – not here). I’ve had conversations with a lot of you. Faith, for many people does not come as easily as it does for others. Many people see the ‘duck’ – and that’s enough. Others can’t help but see ‘the rabbit’, too. And for many then, their spiritual lives are lived on the edge between belief and unbelief. If they are fortunate enough to have someone in their life to encourage them to continue their quest for truth and not give up.

And that’s what brings me to this week’s scripture from John 20. Enter, Thomas. The rest of the community (the disciples, some women and other followers) is gushing with joy. “We’ve seen the Lord! He is alive! He rose from the dead – just like he said he would.”

I don’t know if I ever really appreciated the guts, the nerve of Thomas before this week. He’s with these people that he knows very well. He’s been through everything that they have been through. He’s been crushed, too. His hopes dashed. Hugely disappointed. Confused - without a doubt. (Well, that’s a bad choice of words!)

He also knows – better than any of us, if you think about it – we, who take this completely on faith, to a degree, he knows the character of the other disciples. He knows – surely – that they wouldn’t just make this up. He knows that. Why would they do such a thing? He can see with his own eyes that something powerful has happened in their lives. Something that changed them from scared, depressed, hiding people, to joyful, confident people.

But in spite of all of that, what does he say to them? I’m sorry but … “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

I will not believe. Could he have been saying, “I can not believe?” What do you think the response of the other disciples was to Thomas? Did you realize that it was not until a week later that Jesus appeared to Thomas? What happened between them all during that week? Do you think the other disciples shunned Thomas? Do you think they chastised him? Do you think that they were the ones who changed his nickname from “Dydimis” (the twin) to “Doubter”? Do you think they left Scripture tracks on the bathroom sink so he might run across them while brushing his teeth?
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Well, we don’t know, obviously. Except for one statement that John makes in verse 26…

** A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. **

Thomas was with them. Thomas the ‘doubter’… the unbeliever. The one who would not believe…

*unless… and then,* Jesus appears to him.

Now, because of Thomas’ experience of Jesus, I think we can gain some understanding about our own relationship with Christ. First of all, as someone pointed out, we learn that Jesus is not afraid to call our bluff! Thomas declares that he will only believe when he can touch the wounds of Christ himself. So Jesus appears to Thomas and invites him to do just that – touch and believe. So, in other words, Jesus knew what Thomas needed, and he was willing to grant that to him.

Next – and even more importantly – I think we see in this encounter that Jesus understands our human doubt and will allow us the room to find our belief in our own way and time. Again, it wasn’t the persuasiveness of the other disciples that turned Thomas around. It was Jesus himself. Jesus appeared to him – appeared in exactly the way that he needed in order to believe. Can we draw something from this (I mean, John included this story in his Gospel for a reason!) Can we conclude that Jesus will meet us in our doubt and reveal himself to us in a way that bolsters our belief; in his time – if we truly seek him?

What really is hammering at me from this passage of Scripture is noticing that there was a place for Thomas in the group of disciples. He didn’t believe – at the time – but he was still there. He continued to be welcomed; the other disciples saw their job, perhaps, to be witnesses of the Resurrection through their words and their actions. But they were willing to allow Jesus to meet Thomas on his own terms, not theirs.

I wonder if we are as comfortable with ‘doubters’ today?

Now, I’m not lifting up doubting as a virtue… I’m not saying “let’s celebrate doubters… they are such noble people”… as I said earlier, I believe in assurance. I believe its possible. But I also know through frustrating and much sad experience that I cannot bring assurance to a doubter. I can’t do it. The Lord knows how much I wish I could!
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But that is not my task. I’ve only relatively recently begun to accept the fact that I can’t drag wavering believers (or unbelievers) along on my journey any more than they can drag me along on theirs. Learning to dialog with the Thomas’ in a loving, affirming way can be tricky, too.

But, apparently, the very first group of disciples had at least one doubter among them – for awhile. And they were OK with it – until Jesus took care of it on his own time and terms.

Now look at what Jesus says after meeting with Thomas. His words to Thomas can help us to understand that our faith is truly based on mysteries that may never have earthly resolutions. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says (John 20:29b). Our faith in Christ today was celebrated by Jesus himself, and that was because he knew that we would believe without seeing or touching the resurrected Lord.

We celebrated Easter having never physically experienced the Risen Christ. We believe without having seen the scarred hands and pierced side. We follow his words, having never heard his voice – most of us, anyway. We may doubt, but we are reassured because of the loving encounter between Jesus and Thomas, and because of the example of living community that Thomas found. A place where he could follow his own journey to its completion.

That’s the kind of church I want to be part of. It’s not too neat… and it’s not the kind of church where people can coast, simply swept along by the current that always seems to be going in the same direction. In this kind of church, we need to be clear on what we believe, “always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in within us” (as Paul wrote). But at the same time, truly loving the Thomas’ who are still among us, waiting for their encounter with the risen Lord.

I conducted a funeral service this week. For a believer – 90 year old Dick Boren. As I wrote the message for that service, it occurred to me that in almost every funeral message I’ve ever written I’ve included this line at the end…

For now, we accept the unseen but powerful presence of God who promises that what we see with our eyes is not all there is to life.
We do accept that. It’s either that, or doubt... but every time I share those words, they come with prayers that somehow God would give the ability to do that to the people who are in that place, and who are wavering in their faith. Because I know how hard it is for some.

In the same way... last week, of course, was Easter. There were almost 1100 people here last weekend. You may have noticed that there’s not 1100 people here this weekend! And I know pastors (and some congregation members) who kind of almost resent people that ‘show up’ on Christmas and Easter... you know, they’re like, “Come on! Make a decision! Get off the fence!”.

But I’ve always looked at that differently – and so I pray, and put services and sermons together (as I know our whole staff does) – with excitement, with the hope that something in that Holy week would encourage someone to continue their journey. And if someone gathers up the courage to come back, I pray that they will find a welcome. Even if they are a “Thomas”. But I pray that with the expectation that they will find that welcome – because I know you.

** A number of years ago (2002 – 2003) there was a “Thomas” among us. Some of you knew her, her name was Kathy Morrissey. Kathy described herself as ‘an informed agnostic’. She was a successful attorney, and worked with the Burlington County prosecutor’s office. She lived right around the corner on Fairview Ave., and would (she told me later) often walk by this church.

And then, one Sunday morning she felt compelled, (that was her word) to walk in. And I remember her describing that first visit – she said that tears started to flow as she reached for the door. She cried through the entire service, and was angry at herself for this inexplicable reaction. (She also told me that someone in the service leaned forward and gave her a tissue, and said something like, “It’s OK, honey, I do that all the time!”)

Shortly after that visit, she discovered that she had a very aggressive form of breast cancer. We started meeting shortly after that – and she also received a Stephen Minister. She began to read books that I recommended, like, C. S. Lewis’ “Miracles” and “Mere Christianity”. And I would visit her – and we’d sit in the near darkness of her living room, because the chemo affected her eyes and light was irritating. But she would have a legal pad filled with objections and questions about what she was reading.
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But Kathy found faith. She sent a memo to the Burl Co prosecutor’s office that basically said this, “I have always been so vocal about my lack of faith, I feel the need to be just as forthright about where I am now. I’m a believer in Christ. And this has become so important to me that if this cancer – which helped me to this point – is never cured, it will have been worth it.”

Kathy found faith, but she was a doubter to the very end. She asked me once if I thought she had ‘enough’ faith, because at that moment she wasn’t sure about anything. She was very sick, and knew the end was near. I told her (I think this was from the Holy Spirit) that sometimes when we lack faith, we can lean on people who have it. I said, “You can lean on me, and Sherry”.

I wrote a song for Kathy, that I had a chance to share with her before she died. And she asked me to sing it at her funeral (which was attended by hundreds of people – judges, lawyers, newspaper writers- and was a celebration of life and faith). I did… and I’m not going to sing it to you, but I’d like to share the words of the beginning of this song… it’s about the Thomases that are still among us.

**Long Way Home (S. Donat)
(for Kathy Morrissey)

It’s a long way home when you can’t see the road ahead
With its ups and downs and unexpected turns.
And I feel alone as I press on toward the goal.
So I sing my song, and walk into the night.

If I had the wisdom of the sages, the ability to answer every doubt,
Still, the nature of this world would be a mystery -
There is more that’s going on than I can figure out!
The world is a reflection of its Maker, and woven in its pattern is a plan.
In faith I search for goodness though I cannot understand
For God is neither woman nor man. (Chorus)

The final verse:
The song I sing is sometimes weak and trembling for I believe, Lord help my unbelief.
Though faint, the melody still lingers through my tears and pain it is written on my soul
This world is not my goal!
Lord, give to me the strength to face tomorrow. Lord, give to me the will to face today.
To trust in unseen hands to lead and hold me on my way;
To lean on Love sufficient for the day…
It’s a long way home when you can’t see the road ahead
With its ups and downs and unexpected turns
And I feel alone as I press on toward the goal
So I sing my song, and walk into the Light.

1 The final verse:

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I was proud that Kathy – like Thomas – found a community where she could be honest in her struggle for faith. And I was – and am – joyful, that in his time… Jesus found her, too.