

FEARS AND FEELINGS

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Easter 2
John 20:19-31

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

He is Risen! (*He is Risen, indeed*). That's the exchange that was shared in countless churches around the world last Easter Sunday. And because Easter is a season that lasts 50 days, it's okay to continue that refrain. Because Jesus is alive and so are we.

But if you listened to the gospel reading, it is obvious that not everyone thinks Jesus is alive. Thomas didn't think so, and I suspect that Thomas was not alone. In fact, I think there are some in this church today who resonate with Thomas. You may not flat out disbelieve in Jesus, but you struggle to accept the whole story. And the worst thing is, you don't know who to talk to about your doubt. Well today, I want to talk to you, to tell you that you are okay – that doubting is okay – and that God thinks so too.

My first call as a pastor was at a church across the street from Augustana College in Sioux Falls. We would often see college students in our worship, and it was always great to have their energy in our midst. One spring day there was a knock at my office door from a young Augustana co-ed who asked if she could talk. Though I didn't know her by name, I recognized her from the 9:30 service. "Of course we can talk!" and I invited her in. But the moment she sat down, she couldn't talk; she could only cry.

When she composed herself, she told me that she had grown up in the church all her life; baptism, confirmation, youth group, choir; all of it. In fact, her dad was her pastor, and their home couldn't be more loving and accepting. And that was her problem; because now, after her first year of college, she didn't believe in Jesus any more. The academia of college and the conversations in the dorm led her to doubt the truths of her childhood. Reason had come to displace faith. In a week, she would return home for the summer and she felt guilt and shame, but she couldn't fake her faith anymore. Sound familiar?

I mostly listened for an hour, and then I asked if we could have a prayer, to which she agreed. When she was nearly out the door, I said something to Kristen that I should have said at the very beginning, "**Kristen, even though you don't believe in God, God still believes in you.**" She choked out these four words, but said them

twice. "I know he does. I know he does." That almost sounds like faith, doesn't it? I wish I could tell you how things went when Kristen returned home, but I never saw her again.

On that first Easter night, after three days of weeping and grieving, the disciples were hiding out in the upper room in Jerusalem. This is the same room where they shared the Last Supper, and now they were hunkered down, doors locked, shutters closed, trembling in fear. "What if we're next? What if we are recognized as the friends of Jesus; surely they will kill us too." So they were hiding.

All of a sudden, Jesus appeared. Adding to everything else that was surreal for these disciples, now the risen Lord was in their midst, and they were ecstatic! Jesus showed them his wounds, breathed on them the Holy Spirit, and before they knew it, he was gone again. Now that they had seen him, and heard him, and touched him, there could be no doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead.

There was just one problem: Thomas wasn't among his brothers when Jesus appeared. We don't know where he was, but he wasn't in that room to see Jesus. In his superb book, Good Grief, author Granger Westberg talks about the nature of grief. He writes,

Eventually, there comes a feeling of utter depression and isolation. It is as if God is no longer in his heaven, and even that God does not care. It is during these days that we are sure that no one else has ever grieved, as we are grieving.¹

Maybe that was Thomas; he needed to disconnect from his friends, perhaps deciding that the idea of Jesus being the Messiah was over, so he began to set his sights on the future. When the disciples found Thomas, they announced, "We have seen the Lord!" But Thomas replied, "I don't believe it! And unless I can put my finger into the nail holes, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later (that would be today, wouldn't it?), the disciples were still afraid, still locked together in that upper room, and this time Thomas was among them. They didn't reject him for his doubt. They didn't shame him for his lack of faith. They continued to include him, and on this night, when Jesus returned, he included Thomas too. He spoke directly to Thomas, not to guilt him or scold him, but to address his need. "Thomas, put your finger here, place your hand there; do not

¹ Granger Westberg, Good Grief, 1962, Fortress Press

doubt, but believe.” And the response of Thomas is perhaps the purest confession of faith ever articulated: “My Lord and my God.”

Did you know that John is the only gospel writer who includes this poignant story of Doubting Thomas? Matthew doesn’t tell it, nor does Mark or Luke. Maybe the others were afraid of lifting up doubt as a virtue, or even as an option. Only John makes room for a disciple whose faith is not ironclad; a follower who needs more information, or a student who possesses more questions than answers. Maybe it is John’s way of telling the doubter, “You know, even though you don’t believe in God, God still believes in you.”

John blesses the doubters of this world, even today. While some people are gifted with childlike faith – a faith that is never tested - others slog through life with questions, skepticism and wonder, but they are afraid to doubt out loud for fear of rejection. So it becomes a double-edged sword for the doubter: first comes the doubt about God, and then comes the fear of the church’s judgment. Something Alvin Rogness wrote has provided me with some insight into the doubter. Dr. Rogness says,

Fear always imprisons, paralyzes and drives a person into the narrow cell of extreme self-concern. Love, on the other hand, casts out fear, sets a person free from the prison of self-anxiety, self-defense and self-concern.²

Can you forgive us, doubter? Forgive us for shutting down your questions. For labeling you as an atheist for even asking them. Forgive the church for being the only army in the world that shoots it’s wounded. Forgive us for not loving you just the way you are.

There is a story that goes something like this. A pastor decides to make a mid-week visit on a member of the congregation that he hadn’t seen in a long time. Years ago, these two men had been good friends, they worked on church committees together, the gentleman sang in the choir, and he attended worship every week. But not anymore. It had been many months since this fellow had been in church.

The pastor was warmly welcomed, and they sat in silence in two stuffed chairs, facing a roaring fire in the fireplace. After a while, without saying a word, the pastor got up and walked over to the fireplace, and with the poker, pulled one of the blazing logs out on to the stone apron, and then the pastor sat down. In silence, they

² Alvin Rogness, [The Word for Every Day](#), 1981, Augsburg Fortress

watched that log start to smoke and smolder, and the glow of its ember turned black and cold. Still, without speaking, the pastor got up and used the same poker to push the smoldering log back into the fire, and within a moment or two, that log roared back to life, white hot and flames dancing from it.

The man said, "I get it, pastor. I'll see you in church on Sunday." And the pastor left. That pastor who loved this "Thomas" in his church.

In sharing that story, I realize that there is a little Thomas in all of us. Little doubts. Big questions. Random fears. A nagging feeling about something God did or didn't do when I really needed God's intrusion in my life.

I want to close by asking you to do something out of the ordinary. You know me; I do stuff like this from time to time, and I hope you will participate. In your bulletin you will find a small yellow sheet of paper. Would you take a moment to think of a question that you have about faith? Maybe a question that you would love to pose to God. What fear or concern do you have right now that you could put in the form of a question? Don't put your name on it, but during the offering, would you place that question in the offering plate? Because whether you are a serial doubter or an occasional skeptic, this will be a concrete indicator that doubts and questions are always welcome in this church. Always welcome, and so are you.

Marilyn will softly play while we ponder and pose those questions. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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