

April 16, 2023 Message for Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church Belief and Disbelief, Partners on the Faith Journey: Betsy Gonwa

Bible Wisdom Teachings

- Psalm 16
- John 20:19-31

Jesus and his followers lived in a time when rulers came into power through war and conquest. Roman soldiers could force anyone to carry their heavy packs for a mile. Whole villages would flee when the army approached, to escape this burden. The taxation was also a heavy burden on the subsistence farmers and lowly fisherman. They barely had enough to eat. This was the reality of Jesus and his disciples. And then, of course there was always the threat of crucifixion.

Following the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples had scattered for their own safety. They had been alone during these days of grief and loss. Separated from each other, fearing for their lives. Hiding. Alone. Afraid. Questioning what they had come to believe.

When Jesus rose, it was incomprehensible to them that someone who had been crucified could be alive. Not one of them believed they were seeing Jesus based on their sight alone. They all needed reassurance. Sometimes something we desire appears to us and we do not recognize it simply because it looks different than we expect it to look. This is how it was for Jesus' followers. They literally could not believe their eyes.

Thomas stands out as the one who refused to believe until he touched Jesus' wounds. But, if you read carefully you will notice that Jesus voluntarily showed the disciples his hands and his side. And in the Easter Sunday reading, Mary did not believe she was conversing with Jesus until Jesus said her name. Jesus was prepared for their doubt. He accepted their need for verification, understanding their incredulity and their struggle to believe that what they were seeing was real.

Jesus did not judge Thomas or any of the disciples for being afraid or for doubting. In fact, he already knew it would happen. "Before the cock crows," he said to Peter, "you will deny me three times."

Doubting is to be expected when we are faced with something that is beyond the realm of our experience. We all compare what we see with what we know. We want our beliefs and our experience to match. Thomas is known to us as "doubting Thomas" because he expressed his doubt, not because he was the only one who doubted.

In touching Jesus' hands and his side, Thomas sought a body way of knowing. His experience of living with the reality of crucifixion and death in the Roman empire told him it could not be Jesus. Thomas could not believe based on hearing his friends'

account, or even based on seeing Jesus for himself. Hearing and seeing were not enough. He needed to touch Jesus. Only then could he believe. He needed to know with his body. Not just in his brain.

Have you ever not believed what someone told you because it was too far outside the realm of your experience? Or has someone not believed you because what you said was too far outside the realm of their experience?

Perhaps you have been in a situation where your past experience and your present reality were at odds with each other, and you couldn't believe. Your mind wouldn't let you. When we cannot believe what we see, it is because we are judging the situation, trying to line it up with what we know, trying to make sense of what we are seeing. Sometimes we don't see what is right in front of us and sometimes we see what is not there at all.

This is because we actually see with our brains first. In a movie that was popular 20 years ago, *What the Bleep Do We Know?* the character through whose point of view we are introduced to this reality about how we see is a wedding photographer. The whole time she is photographing a couple's wedding, she perceives the groom to be flirting with one of the bridesmaids. Her perception is not based on what the camera lens is showing her but on her own experience of her husband cheating on her with one of her bridesmaids. Her brain does not let her see a happy couple because her own lived experience gets in the way!

We tend to look for congruence. We want what people say to match their actions. We want what we believe to match what we see and what we see to match what we believe. This explains the hesitancy of the disciples in embracing the risen Jesus. It is not just in our faith journey that we look for congruence. It is just what we do!

When my son's relay team got their heads shaved, in solidarity before running at State, I saw him sitting in my living room, and yet, with his newly shaved head, I did not know it was him! My own son!

Our second child was born at home, by surprise, and I asked our housemate to call my mom to let her know, but she didn't believe him. "How much did she weigh?" she asked about our daughter, and when he answered, "I don't know. We didn't have a scale here!" she said, "Right, Ted. Just have Betsy call me when she gets home."

When I told a coworker that I had seen a 16 point buck in my neighborhood, he laughed me off. He had never seen a buck with more than 8 points in the wild. He did not believe me until the night that he saw that buck in his headlights.

Sometimes hearing is not enough; we need to see. And sometimes even seeing is not enough; we need to touch. Whatever the case, doubting is normal. Encountering

incongruence which leads us to question our belief is the first step. We call it doubt. Actively seeking to adjust our belief to match our new experience, this is how our faith grows and changes.

I believe that doubt and faith are partners, push and pull partners, stretching me and challenging me to grow. Doubting is part of being human. Without acknowledging that I doubt at times, my faith would not be genuine. I would be pretending. I can only have a wholehearted faith when I acknowledge my doubt, or my despair, or my lack of hope. In my own dark valley, I struggle to realign what I believe with what I have experienced. Only then can my faith be real.

Greg Boyle begins the first chapter of his book, *The Whole Language* by saying, “Nothing is more consequential in our lives than the notion of God we hold. Not God. The notion of God. This is what steers the ship. Our idea of God will always call the shots. Meister Eckhart, the mystic and theologian who died in 1328, said, “It is a lie, any talk of God that doesn’t comfort you.” That was his notion. Granted, our conceptions may change and evolve, but when we “hold” them, they direct our course. What matters, in the end, is what kind of God we believe in. “All concepts of God,” Teresa of Ávila writes, “are like a jar we break.”

For me, this image of breaking a jar is a shorthand way of describing my spiritual journey. It has been a continual process of shifting my concept or notion or image of God to fit my reality. And doubt has been necessary. Without doubt, I could not have broken free from illusionment. Becoming disillusioned moved me into *what is* instead of what I imagined. Seeing my bald son did not match the image in my brain of him with a head of thick brown, wild, and often disheveled hair. It was an unexpected reality and the image in my brain needed time to readjust. Hence, some seconds, at least, of doubt.

In Lerita Coleman Brown’s book, *What Makes You Come Alive*, she writes about Howard Thurman, the godfather of the civil rights movement. She shares a formative incident in his childhood. “When young Howard was seven years old, his father arrived home from work very ill with pneumonia. Saul Thurman suffered for about four days before he died. Howard, present in the bedroom, beheld his father’s last breath. Because Thurman was not a church member several local ministers refused to officiate his funeral. Finally one traveling preacher agreed, but in his eulogy he condemned Saul Thurman to hell because he was not a churchgoer. This incident baffled young Howard. He began to wonder about Christianity and how a minister who knew nothing about his father could castigate him in this way. Howard vowed that once he reached adulthood, he would never join a church.

This pledge was short-lived. Howard’s mystical experiences in nature and his burning desire to teach, lead and uplift the human spirit were undeniable, and these longings constantly tugged at his heart. Later in his life he cofounded an interracial, interdenominational church designed to reflect his sense of what God desired:

community or oneness for all people, for all creation. It became a sanctuary for those who sought spiritual renewal and change in the larger society.” He brought into being a faith community that fit his image of God.

Another example of an encounter with incongruence comes from Joan Chittester, a Benedictine nun and best-selling author. I heard her speak at a conference, and she shared about an incident in her childhood that challenged the concept of God which she was being taught. Joan’s mother had been widowed when Joan was a baby, and when she married again, it was to a man who was not Catholic. The nuns at the school Joan attended taught that only Catholics could go to heaven. Joan could not understand why her stepfather, a good and loving man, was condemned to hell. She ran home from school that day, confused and in tears. Fortunately, with her mother’s guidance, she was encouraged to open her mind to a notion of God that was different from the one she was learning about at school. Entering fully into this incident with her doubt and confusion allowed one image of God to be broken and another one to form.

It is at these moments – when we discover incongruence -- that we question, that we doubt.

In Thomas’ case, he gave up everything to follow Jesus. And then came face to face with the crucifixion and death. In trying to make sense of his reality, he doubted what he had come to believe about Jesus. And then he doubted that he was actually seeing Jesus!

Have you experienced such a time in your own life?

One instance that comes to mind from my life is our arrival at our mission site. It wasn’t what I expected. The pre-conceived notion in my mind did not match the reality of what we encountered on the ground. In those first days and weeks, I was filled with doubt. What had we gotten ourselves into? Were we really called to this? Had we been listening to God’s voice? In those days, we were challenged to trust. Like Mary who stayed by the tomb. Like the disciples who gathered. Like Thomas who expressed his doubt. We chose to stay, and in turning to the Bible, we discovered in the Sunday readings, the verse, “Put your trust in God, not in men.” This encouragement to trust, somehow, was enough. We decided to trust.

When things don’t look the way we expect them to look, doubt enters in, and seeing is not necessarily believing. Instead, it is time for growth, and sometimes for the birth of a new belief.

Jesus’ followers lived in the age of empires when those in power promised peace through victory. They did not know of any other way to bring about a kingdom. What Jesus preached was beyond the realm of their experience. They did not understand. For them, death was the end of their hope for the kingdom of God to reign on earth.

But Jesus' faith was in God, not in men. He was guided by the voice of the Spirit, within, and was faithful to that call. He showed the disciples a new way, a nonviolent way. A way through death to new life. He was faithful until the end. Did Jesus doubt his call? We only know that he spent time alone in prayer, and if we believe that he was fully human, then we can imagine that he wrestled with discerning his call and in following it through. But we do not know. The scripture does not tell us.

Crucifixion leads to death, not life. Life does not come from death. But it does! And a new belief is formed. A belief in resurrection.

That is not my son in my living room. But it is!
That can't be a 16 point buck in the middle of the road on Underwood Parkway. But it is!
Babies aren't born at home any more. But they are!

We're always looking for congruence. Trying to make sense of what we see and link it up with what we already know. Sometimes terrible things happen and we doubt our belief. Sometimes amazing things happen and we don't believe what we see.

Thomas is not the only one of the disciples who doubted. All them doubted. We all doubt. We need doubt. If we don't allow ourselves to doubt, then our faith cannot grow. If we want to believe wholeheartedly, then we must let doubt play its role in our faith journey. For real faith, Thomas shows us, is believed not just with the mind, or with the eyes or the ears, but with the body.

Reflection Questions

Recall a time in your life when your experience was incongruent with
what you believed and you were unable to see what was right in front of you.
Have you ever chosen to break the jar of your notion of God?
Is there a part of you that you are afraid to bring out of hiding? Is there a part of you
that you want to bring out of hiding?