

Second Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2009
Pr. Craig M. Mueller
John 20:19-31

DOUBT

Do you think of Christianity as a set of beliefs that people need to mentally check off? The required ones would probably be: the resurrection of Jesus; the full divinity and humanity of Jesus; the Trinity; the virgin birth; the sacraments; life after death. If you have some doubts and can't fully sign on to these beliefs, you are not a Christian.

At the Easter Vigil four adults were baptized in these waters. After renouncing the power of evil, they confessed belief in the content of the Christian faith in the words of the Apostles Creed. *I believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.* In Martin Luther's Small Catechism he ends each section with pretty strong words: *This is most certainly true.*

So is there room for doubts and questions? This congregation says that you are welcome here wherever you are in your spiritual life. Even if you struggle with organized religion. We say that we are open to questions and issues of faith and doubt.

Many writers today are making the point that beliefs-as-files-in-our-brain may be limiting. Perhaps we need to speak more broadly--not only of beliefs, but of trust. And what it means to live with mystery. And having a set of spiritual practices.

Many people eventually face a crisis of faith. They realize that they have outgrown the belief system they had when they were a teen-ager. They may have been raised in a religious system that didn't allow room for doubt or questioning. And as adults they simply can't sign on to the kind of beliefs they were taught when they were young. Instead of struggling with their questions and letting the process lead them to a different and quite possibly a deeper faith, they throw it all away. It makes me sad. They don't know there are people, places and congregations that will journey with them in confronting challenging biblical and theological issues. Because they think that being a Christian is only about beliefs and because they no longer believe them in the same way, they are done with the Church. And they lose important connections to community, ritual, service and a spiritual tradition.

You can understand how people get fed up with organized religion. So often it can come across as having all the answers and leaving no room for doubts or questions. Sometimes the scariest people are the ones who are so certain that they have all the answers and that everyone else is wrong. You can't really discuss anything with people like that. Their minds are made up.

It's on the Second Sunday of Easter that our gospel includes the story of Thomas and his doubt about the resurrection. He needs proof. He needs evidence in order to believe. Here we are, about one-third of the people who were here last Sunday. I wonder if many of those 350 people needed to hear this gospel and to hear this sermon. Most of us struggle with doubts and questions of some kind. Whether about God, the scriptures or the Church. And most of us long to hear the good news that doubts and questions are often the very path to a deeper and more mature faith.

It sounds like the sermon that begins the play "Doubt" by John Patrick Shanley. It was also made into a movie that some of you probably saw in the past several months. Father Flynn's opening line is this: "What do you do when you're not sure?" He talks about the crisis of faith that many people face at one time or another. He goes on to say: "Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty."

As the play goes on we watch the major characters deal with both doubt and certainty. The principal of the school, Sister Aloysius, comes across as a stern and harsh woman, with an uncanny sense of certainty about her. She believes that Father Flynn is having an inappropriate relationship with a student, yet cannot prove it. After I watched the movie I was amazed to discover that I had come to a totally different conclusion about whether Father Flynn was guilty than the person I watched the movie with. That was the intent of the play and movie—for us to realize our own doubt about the situation. At the end Sister Aloysius confesses her doubts but we are left wondering what specifically she means.

In Shanley's preface to the play he writes: "Doubt requires more courage than conviction does, and more energy; because conviction is a resting place and doubt is infinite—it is a passionate exercise."

Life is complex and complicated. There are many questions without answers. Maybe the point isn't to have the answers but to learn how to live in a world that isn't black and white, but is gray, nuanced and full of mystery. Maybe it's less about believing than trusting. And being open to whatever is.

Not only is there a play and movie called "Doubt" but I have a book called "Doubt: A History. The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson." Wait a minute. Jesus, a doubter? The patron saint of doubters is Thomas. Yet the author reminds us that Jesus struggled with his fate in the garden of Gethsemane and cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus also questioned some of the religious practices of his day which led to a new movement and eventually a new religion.

Blessed are those who have not seen and have yet come to believe. We come with our own doubts and questions. We may wonder what happened two thousand years ago. But our joy is complete as Easter happens for us. As the risen Christ comes among us with words of peace and reconciliation. We see and hear this Word of life. We touch it with our hands. Christ appears in word and water, in bread and wine, and in the community gathered around these signs. The first disciples saw the nail marks in his hands and side, and they came to believe. We too see Christ made known in our wounds and in the world's pain and suffering.

We may have our doubts. We may not have all the answers. But the presence of the risen Christ is our life, our health, our joy. And even amid our doubts, we confess: I believe!