

“Doubt” ~ April 11, 2010
John 20:19-31; Psalm 150

The Shroud of Turin is back in the news, again. When this possible “holy relic” appears from time to time, a multitude of questions come with it. Was it the actual shroud of Jesus? Is the image seen on it his or that of someone else? Is this for real, or is it a hoax? Do we believe it or do we doubt it? Wherever we stand on this issue, it is a fascinating puzzle. Evidence rests on both sides of the question. We would feel much better if we were able to draw our own conclusions by running our own dating tests or touching it and seeing how it feels. It is good to note that the church has agreed to allow further scientific tests.

The Dead Sea Scrolls will be on exhibit in Milwaukee when I visit there and I hope to be able to see them. The information they contain has always fascinated me. The ones that interest me, even more, are the ones that are kept locked away, as if what they might contain would set our faith system on its ear. Would this information strengthen our faith or cause us some doubt? Should we be denied knowing about it? Is our faith strengthened or weakened by our doubts and questions?

Some people do not like to question anything in our Bible. They accept what they read in its pages as the final word on all things religious. They don’t want to ask any questions or express any doubts, for fear of having the answers cause them to lose the faith they have. They seem to worship the words instead of the truth of God to which they point.

As Congregationalists, we understand that the pathway that leads a person to an understanding of our faith, is one that we take as individuals, and as a community, as we seek to study and learn more. It is not harmful to our core faith to ask questions. I have learned that, questioner that I am, I still have a very strong belief in God and God’s nature as revealed to us through Jesus. I believe part of my job, as a pastor, is to help people looking for “new truth and light to break on God’s word,” to find the doors they need to open and walk through to a clearer understanding. When we do this, we come to “see more clearly what we have only seen dimly.”

This questioning look at our scriptures is a critical approach to examining what it is we believe. Not ‘critical’ in the sense that we want to pick things apart, but, “critical” in the sense that we want to consider the information before us and make an informed decision.

Thomas, had a critical approach to the news of the resurrection—he wanted and needed some proof to believe what the other disciples had been telling him. If we have grown up anywhere near a church, we have encountered the story of “Doubting Thomas”—the one disciple who would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead unless he had actual physical evidence of it. He is not much different from many of us who think, that “seeing is believing.”

Thomas had been devastated following the crucifixion of Jesus. He had lost a close friend. He had been one of the members of the inner circle of followers. He knew the fate of those who died such a cruel death. In all he had seen they were dead and he could

not trust that things might have been different for Jesus. So, he needed to perform his own “scientific tests” by actually touching the wounds on Jesus’ body and seeing that he was alive. He most likely thought that the other disciples were engaging in some sort of wishful thinking and that they were seeing what they so desperately wanted to see. Doubt prodded him along to ask questions, to come out from wherever it was he had gone to hide, after Jesus had died, and seek the truth.

Many of us would like to be able to actually see and touch the risen Christ to make certain he has risen. But, our faith is based on believing without seeing as we travel in time and space away from the Easter event. We rely on the records we have in the gospels and in Paul’s letters to help us sort out the story for ourselves and determine what it is that makes the most sense to us on our various faith journeys. Everyone is at the place they are supposed to be on their journey and we need to honor differing viewpoints. When we honor and respect one another we can have useful dialogue that helps us understand and refine our own thoughts as well as those of others. We can find ways to express our doubts in safe surroundings and open new doors to a deeper understanding of how we have been called to live and move and have our beings.

When we consider the many stories in our Bible, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament, we will see that many of God’s servants expressed doubts when God called them to move forward in life. Jesus’ disciples were no different. They were about to set out on a bold new journey to spread the “good news” of Jesus’ life and teachings and his death and resurrection. I am not always sure we realize the courage this must have taken. They were not in the friendliest of environments and were probably watched by those who feared that they would carry on in the manner of Jesus. This never stopped them, just as Thomas’ doubts never stopped him from assessing what he saw and moving forward in a deeper faith.

We are asked to continue this tradition using the times we doubt to discover new avenues that help us find the answers we need to become better followers of Christ. We are asked to consider the story of Thomas and the way in which his doubts and questions led him to a stronger faith. We are asked to consider our own stories and discover where the same has been true of us.

-- Amen