

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace from God our Father
And the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

I love the mystical gospel of John... This is doubting Thomas and John's version of Pentecost... The sending of the Holy Spirit...

As I've reflected with this reading, I was drawn to the connection between the Holy Spirit, and the whole miracle of faith. Thomas holds both doubt and belief and comes to confess "My Lord and my God."

A lot of stories today... And I'm a little self conscious that most of them are about me... I always feel a little self absorbed when I tell personal stories...

As a youngster I went to a different kind of church and it seemed to me that the task of religion was to believe. And not only believe in God, but to believe every story in the bible as literally true.

It was as if I had a belief-o-meter stuck on my forehead. And the only thing God was interested in was how much belief I could generate. And the consequences of not believing, was going to hell. So big stakes, and fear driven...

Frankly, I was very earnest about it. When the slightest amount of doubt entered, it seemed sinful and I would get anxious and chastise myself back into a mental

discipline...

I never gave myself permission to ask questions, to wonder, to have doubt. I never had the freedom to experience the richness of faith. When you don't have the freedom to decide for yourself what you believe, it's a little like wearing a mental straightjacket.

In many ways my early religious experience was a spiritual cul-de-sac; a lot of going in circles, anxious about doubt, a lot of being curled in on myself. And to be honest, when I got older and started to think for myself, my faith crumbled like a house of cards. And I kind of threw out the baby with the bath water.

When I was in high school, I had a Sunday school teacher who wanted to get a discussion going about a bible story. She pleaded with people to tell her what we thought. No one was talking; everyone was quiet. After a very long pause, I simply said it was hard to believe. I was just being honest...

The teacher started crying and she ran out of the Sunday school room, she talked with my Dad. I felt terrible! I had no idea she would react like that. My Dad pulled me aside and told me to keep my opinions to myself. I felt badly...

Pretty much after that, I kind of associated religion with fragile people... This event was kind of a turning point for me. For this and many other reasons, I stopped going to church.

Another story... When our kids were little, Kris and I visited her brother who is a pastor, and they were living in New Jersey at the time. He and I brought the kids to a swimming pool to let them play and we had an opportunity to talk, just the two

of us.

He was a curiosity for me, given my experience, I just couldn't figure out how anyone could devote their whole life to this religious thing. I got up the nerve and asked him about Christianity. I asked, "What makes Christianity and why believe it?" He was very thoughtful. Eventually he talked about the resurrection. He explained that was the pivotal point for everything.

I asked if I had to believe in the resurrection to be a Christian. He looked me straight in the eye and simply said "yes." I said "I can't go there; that just doesn't work for me." He was compassionate and said, "You're just like a friend of mine, he can't believe either, but it seems like you want to."

It was an off handed remark, but it stayed with me a long time. Could it be true that I really *wanted to believe*? It kind of startled me...

In our gospel lesson, Jesus appears to his disciples, and they are scared to death, they kept the door locked, and they are full of shame and guilt. These wounded disciples had deserted Jesus when he needed them the most... But now, instead of accusing and blaming them, Jesus does a remarkable thing, he announces Peace be with you. Jesus simply forgives them.

And even more remarkable, instead of firing the disciples for being so fickle and scared, Jesus sends them out on a bigger job... "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus then breaths on them, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

I just love this imagery. Think back to Genesis chapter 2, the second creation story, Yahweh, or God, with His own hands takes adamah which means dirt or dust and like a potter he forms what he calls Adam-- kind of a Hebrew play on words which literally means dirt creature.

God then breaths into its nostrils the breath of life and the dirt creature, the Adam, becomes an animated living and breathing human being. It's a wonderful creation story.

John's version of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples is a very similar story. Jesus takes this group of ashamed and guilty people, people who are inwardly dead, and breathes into them the Holy Spirit.

And animates them as living, breathing and forgiven people, and sends them out into the world to announce the forgiveness of all sins. This is a remarkable story of new creation. The disciples in a sense are a new kind of Adam. They are redeemed; they experienced a resurrection of their own. They were dead in fear, shame and guilt, and rose to a new life in peace and forgiveness.

And it's even more remarkable to imagine that this group of scared, ashamed and guilty people created an entirely new religion. Extending their experience of God's grace and mercy through time and place, all the way here to us, we are also the recipients of that peace and forgiveness. Miraculous isn't it! Only the Holy Spirit could do that...

Faith is an amazing thing. It's hard to describe, a mixture of many things, belief, doubt, courage, persistence, hope? Faith is a mixture of all these things and perhaps other things as well.

Faith is fundamentally about freedom, freedom to ask questions, freedom to believe, the freedom to experience God's love, mercy and forgiveness. Faith is freedom from the bondage of dogma's and ideologies. Faith is personal between you and God, and you are free to live in that relationship, fully forgiven and fully alive!

I read a line the other week that said, "Being a Christian is not about increasing our faith, instead it is about using the faith that God gives us." Christian faith is about professing a God who fills us with hope, and living expectantly into that world and Kingdom for which we hope.

Faith moves us to action; it compels us. Frequently we may not even be aware of what faith is doing in our lives, but in hindsight, when we glance over our shoulder, we are often amazed and surprised at what our faith has done.

We often talk about faith as being the same thing as belief. But I don't think this is helpful. Belief and doubt are two sides of the same coin; you can't have one without the other; it's both. Frederick Buechner said it like this- "Doubt is the ants in the pants to faith." I love that!

The life of faith is living in the tension allowing for both doubt and belief. Sister Theresa lived with tremendous belief, and as her own writings indicated, she also lived with tremendous doubt.

As I've gotten older, I've experienced that the life of faith is not so much a journey into answers, as much as it is a journey into mystery and questions. And doubt is not disbelief; doubt is the wrestling with the deep questions we all live with. Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? What is God doing here? Doubt is the vigor that brings us face to face with questions about our essential humanity.

Down through two millennia, Thomas has gotten kind of a bum rap. We've given him the title of Doubting Thomas; we remember him as the doubter. And yet, it's exactly Thomas, through his doubt that moves him to profess "my Lord and my God."

Thomas makes a confession of faith directly from his soul. It's as though his heart is so utterly overwhelmed.

I get that... As my brother in law remarked so many years ago, "you can't believe, but it seems like you want to." That's it, for me anyway, somewhere in my bones; I trust the resurrection with every fiber of my being...

Resurrection is in our hopes and dreams, in reconciliation, in forgiveness, in graciousness, in health and wholeness. Resurrection is the natural order of creation.

And we are people who live in truth and resurrection. And like Thomas, I believe it, because I've seen it. I've seen it in my life, I've seen it other's lives; it's just what God does...

Amen...