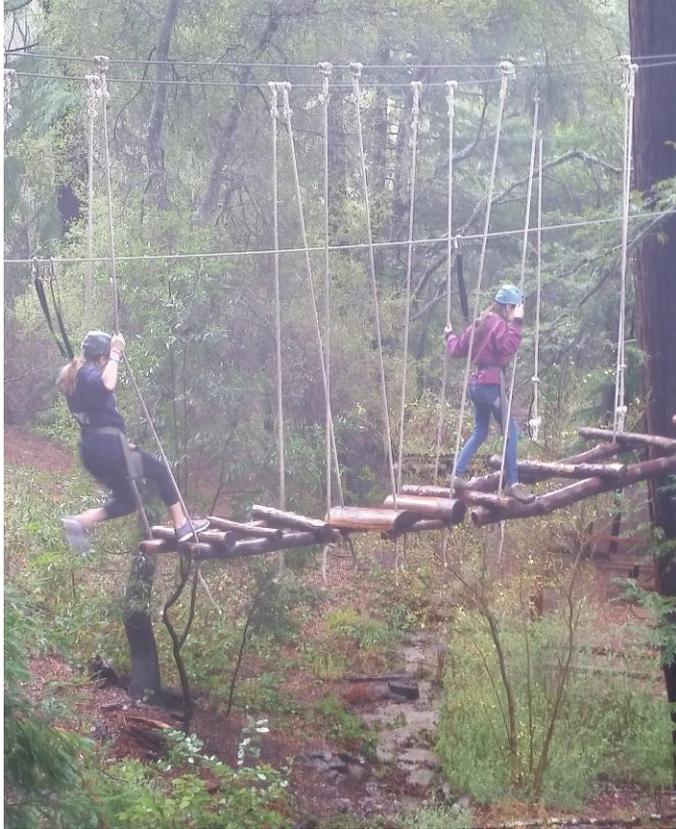


CONFIRMED DOUBTFUL

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
April 12, 2015



John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Confirmation Class at Mount Hermon's Discovery Grove
February 7, 2015

IN CONFIRMATION CLASS, WE TALK ABOUT FAITH AS A JOURNEY, rather than a destination. And we talk about it as a journey we walk with others. There are those who walk alongside us, like the other students in the class, there are those who help pave our way, like parents and teachers, and then there are those who have gone before us.

The disciples of Jesus' day would fall among those who have gone before us. And while each of our faith journeys is unique and particular, we can learn from those who have gone before us. Luckily, while most of the disciples did, eventually, become the leaders and pillars of faith we would expect from them, many of them also failed miserably, falling flat on their faces, and allowing us to believe that perhaps it's okay for us to do so from time to time as well.

After all, these are the same disciples who can't stay up to pray with Jesus in his hour of need. They never really seem to hear or understand what he's saying; one of them betrays him. Another denies him three times, and today, we find that even after they've heard about Jesus' resurrection, even after they've seen the empty tomb, they are huddled together behind locked doors, incapacitated by fear.

Now, some of us would probably throw Thomas into that mix of bumbling, never-quite-getting-it-right mix of disciples. And with good reason. Christian tradition has come to know Thomas as, the "Doubting Thomas:" the one who lacks faith, the one who demands proof, the one who refuses to believe unless he sees it for himself.

But I think Thomas gets a bad rap. The thing is, all of the disciples doubted. And none of them were really able to believe until they saw for themselves.

In fact, Thomas is the only one who was brave enough, in the first place, to leave the house and venture beyond those locked doors. He's missing at Jesus' initial appearance, because he's not afraid to leave the house. Thomas is out and about, probably getting his terrified friends something to eat.

And while he's gone, all the other disciples see Jesus. Thomas simply asks for that same experience.

Traditionally, this story has been used to vilify doubt, to turn it into something that is the opposite of faith. But I think, as we read it again this morning, it is a story that actually normalizes doubt. It is normal, expected even, that we would have doubts. After all, each and every one of the disciples had doubt.

Doubt is not the enemy of faith. Paul Tillich says, "the opposite of faith isn't doubt, the opposite of faith is certainty." You see, certainty no longer requires faith. But doubt is an inherent element of faith. It's that very uncertainty, that unknowing, that pushes us towards faith, towards something that we cannot fully understand, but that we try and hold onto any way.

Our confirmands read their statements of faith to the session this past Tuesday. (Session is our church's elected group of leaders, kind of like a board of directors but with prayer and other church-y things.) These statements of faith were honest, profound, and at times, they sounded more like statements of doubt.

Here is what some of them had to say:

"Sometimes I kind of doubt that God is real...I wonder if people around me believe in God or just say that they do."

Or "I still wonder: if God was here before time, then how did God get there in the first place?"

And "My journey of faith has been a confusing one. I attended church as a little kid, and I never really thought it was actually possible for all the miracles described in the Bible to have actually occurred. When I started learning more about science in school, I started to doubt the Bible."

Doubts. We affirm our doubts.

But then, hear these words, because even in the midst of their doubts, our confirmands could articulate what they believed, what they held onto even as they questioned and grappled with this thing called faith.

They say:

"...I realized that while some people may take these miracles literally, there is also an underlying meaning. For example, Jesus made a blind man see, but I think it actually means that God and Jesus help us see what's really important in our lives and what really matters."

"When I think of the Holy Spirit, I think of a helpful, gentle breeze. For example if it was a really hot day, the Holy Spirit would be a nice cool breeze, and if it was a cool day it would be a nice warm breeze."

"I believe we should all follow Jesus' example, and show no hatred to people around us."

"Being baptized and being with people I have known for a long time and with my parents at Calvary has helped me believe in God. Being in the choir has made me more aware that God is in my life."

"I am a child of God, and God is my hope and the light that shines upon me when I face burdens and obstacles."

"I believe at church we are one step closer to god, one step farther away from brokenness."

And finally, "I know God will accept me for who I am, not someone I wish I was."

These statements of faith were honest, sharing a snapshot of where they were on this journey of faith. And they affirmed what they could even with their doubts.

All of us have doubts. All of us have questions. But doubts are a part of our faith. And we grapple with these questions not because we think some satisfactory answer will come down to us from the heavens, but because the questions are important, because the questions are worthy of our consideration, and because while we may never fully comprehend that which is fully other, a life of faith that is not critical or questioning is, quite frankly, not faith at all.

Perhaps, we are to be more like Thomas. To ask the questions, to desire to see. Our faith, after all, isn't the sum of a bunch of right answers. Rather, our faith is a journey. A journey with God who loves us unconditionally and invites us to ask and struggle with that which we don't understand.

There are some things we will never know, that will always remain a mystery.

I was struck by a story I heard at a conference I once attended. Stephanie Paullsel, an ordained minister in the Disciples of Christ tradition and a professor at Harvard Divinity School, was once asked to preside over communion at an Episcopal church. While she was honored at the invitation, she told them honestly, "I'm not sure I can do this. My tradition doesn't hold communion on an altar, and I don't really understand what it all means."

But the priest responded, "Oh, we don't do this because we know what it means; we do this so that we might find out what it means." Let me say that again, "we don't do this because we know what it means; we do this so that we might find out what it means."

Sometimes it is our actions that precede our faith and our understanding. And we do them with the hope of learning and gaining more insight.

Today, these confirmands will be presented and received. They are on a journey of faith. They come with questions, uncertainties, and doubts.

But they make a commitment to this church and to God any way.

Because sometimes our actions precede our faith and understanding. Because sometimes what we do helps us learn and gain insight.

Sometimes cooking that meal at the homeless shelter, praying with a friend through a difficult time, mentoring a young student trying to go to college, or advocating for just and compassionate laws helps us live our faith rather than just consider it or ruminate on it in our heads.

Sure, all of us have doubts, and all of us have fears. But let us learn from our young people today, and step out and live our faith any way.

And as we do so, know that we do not go alone, that there are others who step out with us, and every step of the way, God promises to be with us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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