

On Sunday, April 27, 2014, Youth Minister Alicia Becker preached this sermon on Youth Ministry Sunday.

THOMAS, THE FALL GUY

Easter 2 – Year A: John 20:19-31

We've all heard it. "Poor dull doubting Thomas, couldn't just believe like a good Christian; had to go and stick his fingers into Jesus to make sure it was real." What's the lesson here? Just believe! End of sermon. . . not really...

I think it's far more complicated than that. I think it would be really easy for us to stop there. Who doesn't love a good bit of public shaming. Thomas's doubt gets dragged out after every Easter to show us all that we'd better be careful or Jesus will come down and chastise us for our unbelief...

What do we know about Thomas? We hear about Thomas twice in Scripture before this fateful day:

1. Not long before the Resurrection, Thomas tries to persuade Jesus not to go to Judea for fear that the environment is too hostile; clearly, he fears for Jesus' life. When Jesus expresses his commitment to the trip, Thomas pledges his life to the cause.
2. Jesus in one of his final addresses shares a mysterious word with his disciples about where he is going. Thomas, once again the questioner, says, "We do not know where you are going, how can we follow you?" Jesus responds with the words we all know so well, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life..."
3. Finally we come to the story at hand: Thomas, away when Jesus appears to the rest of the disciples (who, by the way, were also quite doubtful) asks to touch and see the proof of the Resurrection.

None of these situations sounds all that unreasonable to me. So is Thomas really such a dull knife?

Now you're saying, "Sure Alicia, but what about Jesus' chastisement of Thomas?"

Did He really chastise him? Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Were the words meant for Thomas, or were they meant for those readers charged with continuing the faith who would be so far from this foundational story that sight would be impossible? Blessed are we who have not seen, but yet have come to believe!

When we assume Jesus is chastising Thomas, we paint Thomas as slow, dull or weak of faith. He is too slow to see that Jesus' mysterious path for his followers would be revealed in time; too dull to know better than to ask the risen Jesus to disrobe and allow him to insert his digits into the wounds that took his life; too weak of faith to believe blindly in others' testimony to Christ's rising.

In the midst of the fear and turmoil of persecution the disciples were experiencing post-Resurrection, who can blame them for questioning?

We, however, are unlike Thomas. We are adults, intelligent, and full of faith. We know what we believe, we understand our world, we have science to tell us how the world works, and we know better than to ask questions that might make us sound like idiots.

I have often been humbled by the words of author Mike Yaconelli who wrote "Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith." He writes,

"Children live in a world of dreams and imagination, a world of aliveness. There is a voice of wonder and amazement inside all of us; but we grow to realize we can no longer hear it and we live in silence. It isn't that God stopped speaking; it is that our lives have become louder."

My partner, Cliff, recently shared a thought he had heard on CBC around happiness. The broadcaster was speaking about living a happy life and the challenge of "happy" things like summer slipping away so quickly as adults. Sharing what seems to me now to be so obvious, he observed that as children our summers go on forever because we are constantly exploring new, wonderful, and mysterious things; we are caught up in the little things and each moment matters. As adults we have a very different experience – of summer wrapped up in work, schedules, tasks and responsibilities. How often do we stop and just wonder at something that seems small?

Here we stand in the shadow of Easter, one of the most mysterious events of our faith experience. What is different having experienced it again? I know the patterns of the church year as if they are a part of my fingerprint. I understand what Easter means and I know what the stories are. The experience of Easter for me has become tied to a schedule of family dinners and religious celebrations. But did I stop to explore the mystery of my faith? Am I bold enough to ask the questions that might open my heart to new understanding?

Sam Keen, who wrote the book *Apology for Wonder* discusses at length the phenomenon of wonder. What are the characteristics of it? What causes us to wonder? Be it something wonderful and huge, something that challenges our understanding, or a mystery that is so tied to who we are that we are unable to even articulate a question that would help to unveil an answer that would satisfy us. He writes, "Every wonder-event involves a cognitive crucifixion. It disrupts the system of meanings that secures the identity of the ego. To wonder is to die to the self."

Wonder explained in this way is terrifying. Our fears of death, one more mystery, are so deeply rooted in us. Death of self identifies not a physical death, but a far more painful one. The death of what we held once as truth, our perspective, the only things that make us who we are.

Keen continues, "Such risk is only taken because there is the promise of a resurrection of meaning. To accept the meaning which is given is to find the world redeemed from the drabness and staleness."

Here again, we find the theme of resurrection, as throughout all of scripture.

And so I wonder – with fear and trembling:

- Did the disciples really see Jesus that day amongst them and behind that locked door? Or was this just a mysterious event of faith?
- Did Thomas's "proof point" allow him the peace he needed never to experience fear or doubt again?

Thomas all too often gets a bad rep for being a doubter. Some reports say that after the resurrection he began an evangelistic journey to India. Many churches in India bear his name, and despite the inability to prove his physical presence there, it is undeniable that his life and faith impacted the people of that land.

Maybe Thomas wasn't a doubter after all. Maybe he was just a bit more fearless than we are. Perhaps his questioning makes it easy for us to redirect the attention we might ourselves receive in our own fear and doubt.

I don't have a prescription that leads us into the practice of wonder. Only the experience of the people of faith who have gone before me, the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit to guide and teach me. May we stop to wonder as we walk this path in the afterglow of the Resurrection, strengthened and encouraged like the church in Philippi who read these words,

"Therefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12)

A wonder-filled Easter Season to us all!