



*Do Not Be Afraid of Your Doubt  
John 20:19-31*

*Confirmation Sunday, April 28th, 2019  
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois  
The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

*Text:*

*Eight days later, (Jesus') disciples were again gathered together, and Thomas was with them... (v. 26a)*

If you remember nothing else about this morning, I want you to remember this; Do not be afraid of your doubts.

There are going to be things that happen in your life and in the lives of those who are important to you that you will not understand. There are some things that you will never understand on this side of the grave. At some point in your life everything that you believe in will be shaken to its foundation. It may happen when you are young or middle-age or old. It may happen more than once. But whenever it happens, like your GPS, you will have to “recalculate” your belief system.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled When Bad Things Happen to Good People. This book was born not only out of his years as a rabbi but by a personal tragedy that caused him to rethink everything that he had ever been taught about God. You see, his Aaron was born with a genetic defect that caused “progeria” or “rapid aging”. Aaron died shortly after this third birthday.

“Like most people,” he wrote, “my wife and I had grown up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life.” <sup>1</sup>

But his son’s diagnosis and ultimate genetic death sentence contradicted everything that he had believed. Like the Old Testament patriarch, Jacob, he had to wrestle with God on the banks of the Jabbok River of his soul. In his own words, he was “fundamentally a religious man who had been hurt by life.” <sup>2</sup>

Isn’t that the story of Thomas in today’s gospel lesson? He believed in Jesus so much that earlier in John’s gospel when Jesus told his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem, they tried to dissuade him. One could say that they were afraid for his safety, but I think that it was deeper than that. When Thomas saw that Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem, Thomas turned to the other eleven and said,

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<sup>1</sup> Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, introduction, p, 3

<sup>2</sup> Kushner, p.5

“Let us also go so that we might die with him!” (11:6) Yet, the events surrounding Jesus’ death - the last night, the washing of their feet, the new commandment to love one another as he loved them, the betrayal, all of it - was just too much.

On that first Easter morning when Mary came back from the Jesus’ tomb and told the disciples that the grave was empty, Thomas left. Not to run to the tomb with Peter and the disciple whom Jesus love, but to simply get away. He wanted to make sense of it, and he couldn’t.

In her book Suffering German theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote that “the most important question we can ask about suffering is whom it serves. Does our suffering serve God or the devil, the cause of becoming alive or being morally paralyzed?”<sup>3</sup> The question is not the cause of suffering, but where does it lead.

If tragedy leaves us doubting God and less able to affirm goodness, and pushes us away from God, Soelle wrote, than the dead become the “devil’s martyrs”.<sup>4</sup>

Life and death are neutral. They are two sides of Reality’s coin. It is our response that makes the difference. If we become “bitter, jealous, against all religion, and incapable of happiness, we turn the event into the devil’s martyr. But, if the tragedy leads to explore the limits of our capacity for strength and love, if it leads us to discover sources of consolation that we never knew we had, if it draws us closer to the affirmation of life and of God then we have made the tragedy God’s martyr.

In a few minutes you will be asked a series of questions. The last is perhaps the most important, “Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, giving of yourself in every way, and will you seek the fellowship of the church wherever you call home?”

I want you to take a lesson from Thomas. Thomas may have been troubled by doubt, but his doubt did not keep him away from the fellowship of the disciples. The gospel tells us that eight days later, when the disciples were again in the house, Thomas was with them. It was when he was in the fellowship of the disciples that the Risen Lord appeared to him, to Thomas!

*“Where two or three are gathered in my name,”* Jesus once said in another gospel and at another time, *“I will be in their midst.”* (Matthew 18:20)

Some people say that they can worship on the golf course - while I have heard God’s name invoked many times on the golf course it has not in the spirit of worship. Others say that they can worship God on a hike or in the woods or by the ocean. Those places can be holy, but they are simply the fingerprint of God. When people of faith come together to worship, sing hymns, pray, give generously out of their abundance, and care for one another, that is where the Risen Lord is seen.

I have come to believe that worship is a lot like marriage and that discipleship is a lot like love. There are three elements to love. There is Passion, over which we have little control. It’s just there. There is Intimacy - that spiritual connection we have with one another. We have some control over this element as we become involved in the life of a congregation. And there is Commitment. We have 100 percent control over commitment. This is a willful decision.

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3 Kushner, p.137

4 Kushner, p.138

We live in a time when commitment has lost much of its meaning. The Rev. Dr. Malcolm Nygren, a senior minister of the church that Sue and I served in our younger days once wrote:

*"The commitment between employers or employees is good only until the next downsizing or the next contract negotiations, whichever comes first. There are no longer baseball teams. There is only a group of migrant players, who happen to have chased the dollars to this city for the year.*

*"There are relationships instead of marriages. They cost less. Even marriages sometimes begin with minimal commitment and end with the maximum rancor. The marriage hasn't gone bad. It was always bad. It didn't cost enough.*

*"We get what we pay for. If we pay a cheap price we get cheap goods. If we make the smallest possible commitment we will enjoy the smallest possible happiness.*

*"The Bible exhorts us to love God with all our heart and mind and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is a real commitment. That's a faith that changes everything we are and do...There's nothing cheap about that, but it's worth the price. Anything less is too cheap."<sup>5</sup>*

Commitment is to willingly tie yourself to something larger than you. It is to discipline yourself to stay connected not just when it is easy or because you agree, but when it is hard - especially when it is hard - at those times when you disagree.

So, I charge you, do not be afraid of your doubts. Don't let them control your life or separate you from God. Seek the fellowship of God's people, be faithful in answering God's call and claim upon your life. Remember, in life and in death we belong not to ourselves but to God, in whose image each and every one of us has been made.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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5 Malcolm Nygren, *Shades of Life*, c.2007, pg. 6