

“Through Closed Doors”

March 30, 2008

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31

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One of my favorite storytellers is Garrison Keillor, you know, the gentleman who tells stories of Lake Wobegon on the radio. He wrote a reflection on faith and doubt recently, in which he confesses: “I came to church as a pagan this year, though wearing a Christian suit and white shirt, and sat in a rear pew with my sandy-haired gap-toothed daughter whom I would like to see grow up in the love of the Lord, and there I was, a skeptic in the henhouse, thinking weaselish thoughts.... I don’t doubt God’s existence – there He is – but I doubt His interest in us right now and I haven’t the faintest idea what He wants from me.”

I have to think that Thomas, the disciple who shall live in infamy as “Doubting Thomas,” was in a similar spot right after the first Easter. He had seen the crucifixion and the death of Jesus, but he was the one holdout who had not yet seen or handled hard evidence of the resurrection. “I doubt God’s interest in us right now and I haven’t the faintest idea what He wants from me” could have been in the mind of Thomas as well as Garrison Keillor.

But Thomas is not the only disciple having a faith struggle at the time of that first Easter. Oh I know, we often think that everyone else – that is, the other disciples and close followers of Jesus – were all gathered together singing alleluias and “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” in four part harmony when we read of their gatherings. Well, it is John who reveals otherwise when he writes of their tightly locked doors, bolted shut out of fear. They were gathered together, not joyfully, but fearfully. Thomas was not the only disciple wondering what God would require of them and wondering what the next step of discipleship would be, or even if there was another step of discipleship in the future. Was it safe for them to even step out of the house, they must have thought. How could they be any kind of community without their leader, mentor, and inspiration, Jesus, physically present in their gatherings? What direction would they go now? Who would decide what to do next? Maybe there was no “next step.” Now that everything was so shockingly different, the teaching and healing campaign of Jesus was done, and it was time for everybody to go back home and pick up the pieces of their ordinary lives. Oh Thomas gets to wear the crown of “Doubting Disciple,” but the doubt and fear and indecision and lack of clarity ran thick among every one of those followers.

That fearful gathering of followers is very instructive for followers of Jesus in 2008. There is much doubt and skepticism about the role of the institutional Church, and about Christianity – well, about any religious faith – these days. Social scientists and other analysts speak of things like “paradigm shifts.” In other words, so many of the cornerstones of our culture are found lacking in some manner, and they are tossed aside, rightly or wrongly. They are replaced with other beliefs, but who knows how

lasting and reliable those newly quarried cornerstones can be? Everybody knows on some level that our culture is changing and evolving, but there is no clear roadmap to tell us where we will end up, or who we will become as we rush into an unknown future. It is as if a muddy, angry flooding river propels us away from our safe and secure known world into whatever is next. How exactly is God guiding us through such times?

Many people have found Christian faith to be lacking direction and substance in such an atmosphere. Others have demanded that Christianity revive its former glories and return to that “Old Time Religion,” the “Faith of our Fathers.” It is telling that the churches in our day that are perceived to be growing and bear the label “contemporary” in their worship forms hold a very old fashioned theology, one that espouses Creationism or Intelligent Design theories, and so forth. It is a reaction that grabs whatever worked in the past.

But such a reactionary faith does not answer the honest doubts that our age has created. All of us know people who just sort of wander away from church, and from Christianity, because the old faith dressed up as new faith just doesn’t answer their questions or solve their dilemmas. Enter Thomas, who proclaims, “Needing to believe Jesus is still flesh and blood among us doesn’t help me get on with my discipleship! I just don’t know what to believe anymore!”

Dear Thomas. He struggles. He has to be honest with his own soul. What is he to believe? He still wants to believe. A week later, he’s still hanging out with those other folks who seem to be forming a consensus about what happened to Jesus, but they are still fearful and locked up, unsure of what to do with their newly formed belief when it hits the streets. There are no easy answers for any of these struggling folks.

There are more words from Garrison Keillor as he struggles with his own dilemma about the role of faith and of discipleship. He writes, “Skepticism is a stimulant, not to be repressed. It is an antidote to smugness and the great glow of satisfaction one gains from being right. You know the self-righteous – I’ve been one myself – the little extra topspin they put on the truth, their ostentatious modesty, the pleasure they take in being beautifully modulated and cool and correct when others are falling apart. Jesus was rougher on those people than He was on the adulterers and prostitutes. So I will sit in the doubter’s chair for a while and see what is to be learned back there.”

“Skepticism is a stimulant.” Okay, one can put a positive spin on skepticism, but it doesn’t feel very positive when one is in the midst of it, does it?

You had heard that prayer changes things, and that God listens to everything you offer in prayer. But now your cancer has returned. Wasn’t your prayer good enough? Wasn’t your faith strong enough? Wasn’t God listening to you? Or maybe God just doesn’t like you for some reason.

Faith can take quite a hit when trouble and doubt come to town. What happens when faith doesn't take the expected route? What happens when prayer doesn't give us the answers we expect?

We followed Jesus through all kinds of things, the disciples could have reported. We left our homes and our families, trusting that our neighbors and others would see to their well-being while we took on a righteous cause. We worked long days, sometimes through the night, sometimes going without meals or sleep because so many people needed the ministry of Jesus. We were exhausted, but we knew it was work blessed by God. We followed Jesus into Jerusalem, even when we knew it was inevitable that he would be arrested, but we had faith that he was God's anointed one, who could overcome confronting powers. We risked our own lives and well-being to go with him into that final showdown!

But there was no showdown. They killed him! Then they watched for us! Was all of this sacrifice for nothing? Were we conned by Jesus? He had so much truth and wisdom and love, how could we not follow him?

Looking back, it is easy to see how shattered the faith of all of the disciples, not just Thomas, would be. Indeed, they bolted and barred the door! Who wouldn't? Their world was in pieces, and nothing made sense.

Then all at once, Jesus is right there with them, saying, "Peace be with you." Peace. No locks can keep him out, no doors, not even tomb doors, can hold him in. "Peace be with you." Jesus does not give them every answer they require, and Jesus does not map out the destiny of humankind for them. It's too much to take in at once anyway. But he is with them in this time of turmoil. Jesus is with them as they struggle to make sense of their world. Jesus is with them as they cower in fear. And Jesus brings them peace in spite of it all. And then Jesus is with Thomas, and I have to think that Jesus is standing beside Garrison Keillor's doubter's chair in the back.

This we know, and this we can hold. Our world does not always make sense. Our answers produce far more questions than results. But Jesus is with us, and calms us to go through it all. The living Jesus came to us as Baby Immanuel, "God with us," and Jesus is "God with us" to this very day.

But Jesus has more to say to these disciples who are like toddlers in faith, learning to walk on their own. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Here is the guideline for the disciples, and for all disciples through the centuries, down to you and me today. The Church is sent to the world from God to be "God with us," to continue the ministry that Jesus began. The Church is rooted in and continues the ministry of Jesus Christ. Now, that may look different in every age and culture, and it may be done in different ways, and it may be recited with different words and concepts and images, but that is our purpose as the Church. We are to be Christ, going through the closed doors of our age,

reaching those who are fearful and discouraged, those who have no hope, and we are to walk alongside of them and say, "Peace be with you!"

Oh yes, there are realistic pressures that come with any voluntary group, pressures of attracting new members, keeping old ones, motivating people to participate, maintaining a meeting place, and so forth. Even so, the Church is different from other social groups. The Church has its beginnings in a movement begun by God, and the Church discovers its reason for existing not in its apparent successes or failures, not in its size or influence, but in the call and commission of Jesus Christ.

What does a faithful Church look like in 2008? What about a faithful disciple? Well, there are lots of ideas and there are lots of theories, because things that were assumed and established 50 years ago have been moved to the realm of obsolete by many. But the Holy Spirit still prods and nudges and urges people toward faithfulness. And there is a time and a place for skepticism and honest doubt. Thomas and his companions had to struggle with a lot before they felt confirmed to launch out into uncharted territory to become the Church.

But there is also Jesus Christ, who comes to us in those times of questioning, who steps beyond all our obstacles, to reach out and take us by the hand and say, "I am always with you, no matter what. May you be filled with peace, even when you have no reason to be at peace." And it happens. The peace of God comes without clear solutions or resolutions. The Church and its believers can step ahead into the murky future, because whatever is ahead, Jesus will be there. Jesus will be there. Thanks be to God! Amen.