

John Sampson
"The Power of Doubt"
Text: John 20:24 - 28
Preached at KVCC
August 5, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Doubt.

What is more ordinary than doubt?

I doubted whether the rain would hold off during this weekend's church bazaar.

I was raised to doubt what our government tells us.

I have often doubted the tradition that demands I believe Jesus was literally and bodily raised from the dead.

What doubt do you hold in your hearts and minds this morning?

Do you have doubts about yourself, about your family and your friends? Do you also share doubts with me about our nation, or about the literal truth of the stories of our spiritual tradition?

I think for many of us the question is not whether or not we have doubts. Of course we have doubts. It's more a question of the subject and the intensity of our doubts.

As we continue our summer sermon series Extraordinary Time – a series that seeks to open our spiritual eyes to witness the ways God works in our lives not just through stunning, earth-shaking miracles, but more often in the simple and quiet mundane events of our day-to-day lives – I was asked by a member of this community to speak about doubt, the doubt we may have about our faith, the doubt we may have about our tradition.

What is more ordinary than doubt?

But also what has the possibility of revealing God's deep commitment to us as her children more than our deepest, and most haunting doubts?

The story we heard this morning is such a well known story that I didn't want to use it as our reading. I figured that many of us have heard the story of doubting Thomas so often

that the power of the story may no longer grab us the way it did the first time we heard it. And I thought that surely there must be other lesser known stories and sayings regarding doubt that could awaken us to its profound power and possibility.

So, I did a quick search.

Unfortunately, almost everything I found cast doubt in a bad light. Often we're told in our scriptures that doubt - about God, about miracles, about Jesus - is a sign of some kind of failing within our characters, and within our worth as people. In our tradition doubt is to be avoided, and overcome.

But I have to say that I throw my lot in with Rilke. I throw my lot in with Thomas. I throw my lot in with all of those who experience doubt as a powerful tool to deepen our understanding, and confirm the truth of that which we have heard and experienced.

I too must touch the wound before I believe. Maybe you're like me in that.

Rilke, like many passages within our sacred scriptures, is fully aware of the threatening possibilities of doubt. It can spoil and make ugly; it protests and can paralyze. It can run the train of our lives off the rails, instead of delivering us to a more fulfilled existence. This is what doubt can do to all of us if it is not harnessed and cultivated.

People often ask me what our church is like.

They want to know something about the personality of Keene Valley Congregational Church. What makes us, us? What makes us different from other congregations?

And one of the things I share with them is how we hold our doubt, as individuals, and as a community.

I don't think doubts about our tradition make us unique; every member of every congregation has doubts. But I think what we do with our doubts sets us apart, and is one of the really important and priceless gifts God has given us.

Because I don't experience our doubts as paralyzing us. Instead, they open us to a discipline of spiritual exploration where we can dig deeper, consider different interpretations of our faith than the ones our spiritual ancestors willed to us, translate our tradition into a holy language born of today, born of this place and of this time and of our ordinary lives, and motivate us to reach out to other religious traditions for the insights they offer into the experiences common to all humanity. I think in this community our doubt takes the ordinary and time worn vessel of our tradition and turns it upside down so that it can show us again how God has never left us, and is still there, right in front of our eyes, closer than our own jugular veins.

Did Jesus literally and bodily rise from the dead?

Haven't we all wondered about that story? Haven't we all doubted that story? Haven't we all demanded, just like Thomas, proof before we will believe the unbelievable?

If you do, first of all know that you are not alone.

In our congregation let us be honest with each other about our doubt, and know that if you doubt something you hear from our tradition, there are plenty of others sitting right here along with you in these pews doubting too. And that doubt has been with our spiritual ancestors since Thomas, since before Thomas, all the way back to the beginning.

But I hope that your doubt about the resurrection won't paralyze you, that it won't shut you down spiritually, and simply reject our tradition and all it has to offer us.

Instead, I hope it will open you up so that you can say "you know, I don't believe that Jesus came back from the dead literally. But I wonder what this story could mean for me today. I wonder if it has a truth to tell that goes beyond literalism. I wonder if resurrection can happen not just to Jesus, and not just a long time ago. I wonder if there are experiences in my life and this world that I could describe only by using the word 'resurrection.'"

You see doubt is an ordinary experience. But if we use it, and harness it, it can allow us to ask the questions, and search out the experiences, that can reveal to us that we definitely do live in an Extraordinary Time where God is to be found not in the answers given to us, but in the doubts that invite us to see anew the holy Presence that is all around us, and embraces us like a mother would her children.

Amen.