

A Tangible Faith

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This year, I have had the joy and privilege of leading a wonderful confirmation class. Oh, I know, I always say they're wonderful, even when what I mean is...interesting Or...challenging. Or...downright difficult.

But whether a particular class is interesting, or challenging, or downright difficult, it is a wonderful class, because confirmation is a unique opportunity to spend months at a time focusing on questions of faith.

And I think this year's class did that with plenty of curiosity, joy, and celebration. There were many deep conversations this year. Lots of creative connections. And cookies. Lots and lots of cookies this year.

But you know, I have to give you guys a lot of credit. You are entering into full church membership in some unique times. As I talk to people in and out of the church, I am hearing more and more doubt. More and more resistance to the idea of faith. More and more outright ridicule and argument when it comes to matters of religion and belief.

Take my friend Dave, for example. He was raised Catholic, but in the last few years, has become increasingly hostile to religion of any form. One of his favorite phrases is:

"If you tell me you have a dragon in your garage, it's your responsibility to show me the dragon, not my responsibility to believe you."

Basically, he's saying, make up whatever crazy story you want, about God, or aliens, or dragons, but you need to prove it before I believe it.

And he's not alone.

More and more people are leaving the church because they don't believe there are enough tangible facts to faith.

Which is why I find it both fitting and ironic that our lectionary passage for today, a day to celebrate faith, is the story of the apostle Thomas. Now, I have trouble calling him doubting Thomas, and I'll explain why in a minute.

First, I want to point out that Thomas' story is always the lectionary passage for the Sunday after Easter. Because Easter was so late this year, Confirmation Sunday is the Sunday after Easter, and here we are, celebrating faith and doubt on the same day.

But is Thomas' story one of doubt at all?

Much like my friend Dave and so many others, Thomas is asking for proof of the things that have been said to him. It's not an unreasonable request. In fact, the disciples

telling Thomas about their encounter with Jesus were in the same boat he was just hours ago.

Locked in a room, worried and afraid, unsure of what was going to happen next, for they believed Jesus was dead.

But Jesus came to them, and gave them a word of peace. Calming their fears and showing them that all would be OK.

As one friend points out...

"Thomas is not the bad guy in the story. Some people have head faith, some people have heart faith, he had tactile faith...he has to see and touch in order to believe."

Thomas received what he asked for. The ability to touch and to see. To have proof. To be given a tangible faith.

But where does that leave us today?

When we question and doubt, what will we find on the other side?

A friend tells a story...

I remember when I was in high school going through a particularly rough patch in my life of faith, with doubts about any and all of it. I went to talk to our youth group leader (our associate pastor) because, like a good high schooler, I thought I should stop coming to church. I didn't want to be a hypocrite sitting the pews. He told me I didn't have to stop coming, and really I shouldn't stop coming. I insisted that I didn't believe any of it. He answered back, "It's OK. We'll believe for you."

That friend is now a minister, helping others to know the love of God in ways that make sense to them.

The well-known preacher Barbara Brown Taylor also speaks of how we gather in community and pray together so that even at the times we struggle to have faith, our commitment to each other means that we carry those who are struggling.

Now, I don't think anything would be more infuriating to my friend Dave than if I were to say to him, I see that you're struggling. Don't worry, I'll pray for you. I'll just believe for you until you come around.

No, I don't think that would go over well at all. But what I do do is listen to his arguments, and offer my own witness in return. I can't provide proof that God exists, any more than I can provide proof that a dragon lives in my garage, but I do know that there is something greater than myself that connects us, one to the other.

I know that we are all part of one human family. That hope is greater than fear, and love is stronger than death.

I can't give you a tangible faith. One that can be captured and measured observed and recorded. And perhaps that's as it should be.

There is a saying that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but apathy. Doubt itself is not a problem. It's when we stop caring about the answers that we find ourselves in trouble. So as you continue your faith journey. Whoever you are, and wherever you are on that journey, keep questioning. Keep asking. Keep seeking and wondering and watching. But remember, too, what the great Theologian Fredrick Buechner once said,

"What we have to remember is that our eyes are not all we have for seeing with, maybe not even the best we have.

Our eyes tell us that the mountains are green in summer and in autumn the colors of flame. They tell us that the nose of the little girl is freckled, that her hair usually needs combing, that when she is asleep, her cheek is flushed and moist.

They tell us that the photographs of Abraham Lincoln taken a few days before his death show a man who at the age of fifty-six looked as old as time. Our eyes tell us that the small country church down the road needs a new coat of paint and that the stout lady who plays the pump organ looks a little like W.C. Fields and that the pews are rarely more than about a quarter filled on any given Sunday.

But all these things are only facts because facts are all the eye can see. Eyes cannot see truth. The truth about the mountains is their great beauty. The truth about the child is that she is so precious that without a moment's hesitation we would give our lives to save her life if that should somehow ever become necessary.

The truth about Abraham Lincoln is a humanness so rich and deep that it's hard to stand in his memorial in Washington without tears coming to our eyes, and the truth about the shabby little church is that for reasons known only to God it is full of holiness. It is not with the eyes of the head that we see truths like that, but with the eyes of the heart."

The eyes of our hearts will show us what we cannot see with the eyes in our heads. That Jesus is alive in this world, not just on Easter Sunday, but each day.

As Kate Huey puts it, we see and know resurrection "in every experience of death leading to new life, every experience of healing and grace, forgiveness and new hope. Relationships repaired and renewed, churches brought back from the brink of closing to new and vibrant ministry, health restored after suffering and illness, delight in life after long grief...we experience resurrection and new life, in moments and ways both large and small."

Friends, I wish you faith. Faith that you feel. Faith that changes. Faith that grows. Faith of truth, not facts. Faith that stretches past the limits of what the world can show you in terms of the tangible. As we share in the rite of confirmation, may we all become stronger in faith as we walk this journey together.

Amen.