

The Thread of Faith

The Rev. Dr. Sandy Selby – Westminster Presbyterian Church

Second Sunday of Easter, Year B – April 11, 2021

Text: John 20:19-31

The Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner tells the story of his friend, an apparently healthy 68 year-old man who died in his sleep.

He died in March, and in May my wife and I were staying with his widow overnight when I had a short dream about him. I dreamed he was standing there in the dark guest room where we were asleep looking very much himself in the navy blue jersey and white slacks he often wore. I told him how much we had missed him and how glad I was to see him again. He acknowledged that somehow. Then I said, “Are you really there, Dudley.” I meant was he there in fact, in truth, or was I merely dreaming he was. His answer was that he was really there. “Can you prove it?” I asked him. “Of course,” he said. Then he plucked a strand of wool out of his jersey and tossed it to me. I caught it between my thumb and forefinger, and the feel of it was so palpably real that it woke me up. That’s all there was to it. It was as if he’d come on purpose to do what he’d done and then left. I told the dream at breakfast the next morning, and I’d hardly finished when my wife spoke. She said that she’d seen the strand on the carpet as she was getting dressed. She was sure it hadn’t been there the night before. I rushed upstairs to see for myself, and there it was—a little tangle of navy blue wool.¹

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed.” That is how the day had started for the followers of Jesus. Mary had wept bitterly, but when Jesus called her by name she ran to the disciples and said, *“I have seen the Lord!”* Simon Peter had looked at the empty tomb and then left. We’re not told whether or not he believed at that moment. When the Beloved Disciple went into the empty tomb, he *“saw and believed.”*

That night, the disciples—other than Thomas--were in a room with the door locked because they were afraid. Jesus appeared to them, said “Peace be with you,” showed them his hands and his side, and they rejoiced. Then Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. Later, when the disciples told Thomas what had happened, he said he would not believe until he had seen and touched Jesus himself. We’re told that when Jesus appeared to him a week later and showed him the wounds in his hands and in his side, Thomas believed.

Unquestioning belief, reluctant belief, ambivalence, doubt. In the story of Easter morning and evening we hear the full range of faith responses to the astounding events of that day.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992),7-8.

We tend to define Thomas as “Doubting” Thomas, somehow less committed and less faithful than the other disciples. But to do this is to sell Thomas short. After all, *he* wasn’t hiding in a room with the door locked when Jesus first appeared! The story in John’s gospel doesn’t tell us where Thomas was at that point. Unlike the other disciples, he might have believed Mary’s story about seeing and speaking with the risen Lord that morning by the empty tomb. Instead of being locked behind closed doors with the other disciples, Thomas might have been out in the streets, looking for Jesus! And what about the disciples who *did* see the Risen Lord? John tells us that a week later, when Jesus returned and appeared before Thomas, they were all still in the house with the doors shut! Seems like Thomas isn’t the only “doubter” in the group!

While we tend to remember Thomas by this gospel lesson that is always read on the Second Sunday of Easter, he appears in a few key roles in John’s gospel. When Jesus decides to visit his sick friend Lazarus, Thomas knows this is a dangerous trip and tells his fellow disciples: “*Let us also go, that we may die with him*” (John 11:16). At the Last Supper it is Thomas who asks: “*If we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?*” To which Jesus replies in those words that have come to mean so much to us: “*I am the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:5-6). Thomas, it seems, is a man of action who doesn’t take other people’s word for it. He needs to see for himself!

We remember Thomas for his doubt, but the gospel tells us the story of a man on a faith journey. Bravery, fear, confusion, doubt, faith. Is his journey so different from our own?

Frederick Buechner says, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.”² In his book *Falling Upward*, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes, “Somewhere in the journey of our lives, the faith we inherited stops working. We go through a transition period, a period of letting go of many things and holding on to a precious few.”³

That certainly was the case for me. When I was thirty years old, a tragedy in my immediate family profoundly shook my faith. I lost my belief in God—at least, the God who had fit very well within my comfortable world for the first thirty years of my life. I found myself in a spiritual wilderness. For three years, I forced myself to go to church, out of a sense of habit and duty, more than anything else. More often than not, I sat there with my arms crossed, responding to the Creed and to the message from the pulpit by saying to myself, “Oh really? Prove it!”

What ultimately happened was an example of the church at its best. A friend and fellow parishioner was able to help me see beyond the limits of my own horizon. She connected me with someone in the congregation who had a very different life circumstance than my own, yet shared with me not the daily details of life, but the experience of tragedy that left us both wondering whether God was really worthy of worship. Through conversation and questioning, and more than a few tears, I and my companion on the journey of faith came to a new understanding of God and the way God works in the world. Do I still have doubts? Do I still struggle to see how God is at the

² Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), 20.

³ Summarized in Brian McLaren, *Faith After Doubt* (New York: St. Martin’s Publishing, 2021), xiv.

work in the world, with so much tragedy, so much violence, so much hatred? Of course I do. At various times in our lives, we all have doubts.

It has been said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith but an *element* of faith⁴. Remember the story in the 9th chapter of Mark's gospel about the father of the epileptic child who cries out, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" (Mk 9:24). Doubt keeps the door open, if only a crack, and in the void the voice of God can be heard in new ways.

I like the way Frederick Buechner puts it: "Faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway. A journey without maps."⁵ In his book *Faith After Doubt* that was published earlier this year, Brian McLaren says, "Doubt need not be the death of faith. It can be, instead, the birth of a new kind of faith, a faith beyond beliefs, a path that expresses itself in love, a deepening and expanding faith that can save your life and save the world."⁶ That isn't the kind of faith the disciples had on Easter evening, locked behind closed doors. Not yet, anyway.

McClaren names four stages of faith development that we may experience during our life journey: simplicity, complexity, perplexity, and harmony. "Doubt," he says, "is the passageway from each stage to the next."⁷ In that room on Easter evening, the disciples were somewhere between complexity—coming to terms with mystery—and perplexity—raising doubts and asking questions as they came to terms with their fear, and their deep grief.

That may well have been where Frederick Buechner was—somewhere between complexity and perplexity—after the sudden death of his friend, Dudley, whose widow he was visiting shortly after Dudley's death. Then he went to sleep, and dreamt about the "little tangle of navy blue wool" that he caught between his thumb and his fingers and that apparently, was from the blue wool jersey Dudley was wearing in Buechner's dream.

Buechner writes:

The dream about my friend may well have been just another dream, and you certainly don't have to invoke the supernatural to account for the thread on the carpet... Maybe my friend really did come to me in my dream and the thread was his sign to me that he had. Maybe it is true that by God's grace the dead are given back their lives again and that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is not just a doctrine.... Things like my dream story happen every day to everybody. They are a dime a dozen. They mean absolutely nothing. Or. Things like that are momentary glimpses into a Mystery of such depth, power, beauty, that if we were to see it head-on, we would be annihilated.... The evidence both ways is fragmentary, fragile, ambiguous. A coincidence can be, as somebody has said, God's way of remaining anonymous, or it can be just a coincidence. Is the dream that brings healing and hope just a product of wishful thinking? Or is it a message from another world? Whether we bet Yes or No, it is equally an act of faith.

⁴ Attributed to Paul Tillich.

⁵ *Wishful Thinking*, 25.

⁶ McLaren, 212.

⁷ McLaren, 43.

If someone were to come up and ask me to talk about my faith, it is exactly that journey that I would eventually have to talk about—the ups and downs of the years, the dreams, the odd moments, the intuitions. I would have to talk about the occasional sense I have that life is not just a series of events causing other events as haphazardly as a break shot in pool causes the billiard balls to careen off in all directions but that life has a plot the way a novel has a plot, that events are somehow or other leading somewhere. Whatever your faith may be or my faith may be, it seems to me inseparable from the story of what has happened to us.⁸

Buechner's story, your story, my story. Toward the end of today's gospel Jesus says, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" Behind closed doors the Risen Lord gives the frightened disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. They learn, reluctantly at first, that faith is more a verb than a noun, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they open the door and go out into the world to proclaim the good news.

In this season of COVID, we too may be locked behind closed doors and, like the disciples, we may be somewhere between complexity and perplexity in our journey of faith. But Jesus is here among us, he has breathed on us the Holy Spirit, and he is sending us forth into the world to do his work of forgiveness, reconciliation, and love.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

⁸ Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*, 8-12.