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The Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

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Becoming a priest in this diocese involves many steps and all sorts of assessments: exams on theology and the Bible, psychological tests, and (among other things) a full day of in-person interviews with diocesan leaders. I've been told that the in-person interviews have improved tremendously in recent years but that, in the past, they were legendary for ambushing prospective priests with intensely personal, spiritually intrusive questions: queries along the lines of "describe to us your soul's darkest night."

My interview questions were, thankfully, much tamer. And while I have forgotten most of what I was asked, I do remember being in a small room with a couple veteran priests who posed to me the following scenario: "A member of your parish who hasn't been to church in many weeks comes to your office one day and says that she is furious with Jesus. She says that she asked Jesus to heal her husband of a serious illness, but in fact, her husband has gotten progressively worse and clearly is nearing his last days. She is very angry with Jesus, is struggling with deep doubts to her faith, and wants to know how Jesus could do this to her. How do you respond?"

I don't remember my full answer, but I do recall saying that I would not try to defend Jesus. Instead, I think there's much more value in helping the parishioner work with her anger and explore the value of her doubts, because doubts are precious things, invaluable opportunities to investigate what is not working in our faith, where our relationship with God is stuck, and where God's Spirit might actually be stimulating doubts in order to nudge us towards deeper spiritual growth.

The eminent theologian James Cone writes approvingly of doubt in his seminal book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Cone states: "Suffering naturally gives rise to doubt. [In the midst of suffering] doubt is not a denial but an integral part of faith. It keeps faith from being sure of itself. But doubt does not have the final word. The final word is faith giving rise to hope."

Like the woman in the scenario posed to me during my priestly interviews, we might know people—perhaps even in our own families; perhaps even ourselves—for whom suffering has fostered a wounded resistance to faith. "Don't talk to me about the love of God," they say. "You don't know what happened to my [sister/child/marriage/etc.]" As James Cone observes, the doubt underlying such words is the natural reaction to suffering. Real pain normally produces strong emotions, including anger against God and doubt of God's love. And, while this reaction can be difficult to respond to, it actually suggests some presence of faith, because it's really hard to be angry at someone whom you don't believe exists. If one didn't have any faith, apathy is more likely to be the response, but not a strong, emotional reaction to the mention of God and God's love.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we see Thomas expressing a similar sentiment of hurt-fueled doubt when his friends talk to him about Jesus. “I devoted my life to Jesus for three full years,” Thomas seems to say. “I thought he was the Son of God who would bring God’s kingdom on Earth. And now I just saw him brutally murdered. I don’t want—I cannot—hear you babble about seeing him somewhere. It’s too soon. I’m too raw. My heart just got burned by Jesus. I cannot just open it up again.”

Thomas’ doubt is a doubt which emerges from suffering and inner pain, and while it is not a pleasant experience in the moment, as Cone observes, this kind of doubt can actually be very beneficial, because it is a doubt that respects the precious value of true faith.

Thomas is not just gonna throw his heart around and believe whatever whim of idea or sacred rumor filters through the Jesus’ community’s grapevine. Thomas knows that true faith—real trust—is costly; it’s not something you just show up for when you feel like it; real trust in God involves 24/7 commitment. It’s not something you schedule into the rest of your life; instead, faith implies a whole new life. Thomas knows how precious this faith is, and how much faith in Jesus requires. And so after he’s just suffered the painful loss of his faith in Christ, he’s not about to suddenly rejoin the bandwagon when his buddies make the preposterous claim that Jesus is actually not dead but has risen.

Doubt keeps Thomas’ faith honest. Doubt ensures that Thomas has a healthy amount of incredulity. He doesn’t invest himself in whatever cheap faith propositions are floating around. Instead he takes faith seriously enough to let doubt fuel a healthy investigation of the claims about Christ. But Thomas also knows when doubt has served its purpose and needs to be released so that faith can flourish.

Some people continually give God greater and greater tests: “I’ll believe if you do X.” And then when X happens, the terms get changed to “and if you do Y” and then “Z.” For such folks, they’re no longer using doubt; instead, doubt has mastered them. Like a malignant tumor, doubt in some people metastasizes and spreads eventually beyond their control. But Thomas is wise: he uses doubt to fuel deeper investigation, but he knows when incredulity has run its course and needs to be replaced by faith: not blind faith or simple faith, but a wise faith, a faith that is rich and nuanced and complex, a faith—like a vintage wine—that has been matured through doubt’s careful testing.

Where in your spiritual life can you detect some doubt? Maybe it’s doubt around a core Christian doctrine, like Jesus’ resurrection, or uncertainty about God’s love in a world of immense suffering. Wherever your doubts lie, I’d encourage you to make the effort to dig deeper in that area; investigate what it is that is troubling you and how other Christians over the Church’s long history have navigated those same

questions. Bring your doubts to God in prayer and, over time, let God reveal dimensions, aspects, and perspectives that, right now, we may not even realize exist. Having doubts is not a problem at all, but may we not waste the tremendous opportunity they present for spiritual exploration, discovery, and growth.

Following “doubting Thomas,” who touched the mysterious wounds of the risen Christ, may we learn from him how to work with doubt, letting doubt spur us into deeper investigation, deeper seeking, of the God we wish to know. May we heed our doubts, especially those born from pain, and make them useful to us by pushing us beyond complacency in our faith. At the same time, may we cultivate the wisdom to know when doubt is no longer aiding us and must be set aside so that faith may flower in its place. Amen.