

Infectious Faith, John 20:19-31

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April 19.2020

Dear Friends, I greet you in the name of our Risen Lord!

Gerhard Frost was a Lutheran pastor who published several books, including a collection of free-verse poetry. One of my favorites, entitled "Faith Gnaws Too," begins in this way:

"Yes, doubt does keep gnawing at one's faith."

I said it to a friend, my friend in deep distress.

I said it to encourage, but quickly he replied, without a moment's hesitation,

"But faith keeps gnawing at our doubts too!"

Today we have heard about the doubts that plagued Thomas after Jesus' resurrection. He hadn't been there, when Jesus appeared to the others on Easter night. And, for whatever reason, he was not ready to stake his claim on their reports that Jesus, once dead, was alive again.

"Doubting Thomas." You know, I rather think that Thomas has been unfairly labeled. In fact, we could have called Thomas, "Loyal." *Loyal Thomas*. He's the one, after all, who suggested that they go to Bethany, despite grave danger, at the time of Lazarus' illness. It was Thomas who said, "Let us go and die with him." That's loyalty! And it's not like Thomas was the only one with doubts. All of them doubted and were fearful in those early days. And I think it's safe to say that all of us have our doubts, too.

Today, along with Thomas, we have an opportunity to probe those doubts. I think we will find that doubt can have an upside. The trick is to not remain in our doubts, but allow the Holy Spirit to use doubt as a tool to grow in us a stronger and more resilient faith. A faith that is more infectious, you might say, than doubt.

So, you might ask, what are those upsides? Because some people think that doubt is bad, maybe even a sin. Doesn't the Bible get on our case when we entertain doubt? So I checked it out. Yes, of course there are times when doubt is challenged. But there are also times when it is simply acknowledged, and not condemned. The Bible has many such passages. In fact, according to Philip Yancey, the doubts commonly expressed by agnostics like Voltaire, Bertram Russell or Richard Dawkins are already included in biblical books like the Psalms, Job or Lamentations. God, says Yancey, seems to be "rather doubt-tolerant."

Doubt can be good when it helps us to be honest. Doubt which is suppressed as being sinful or even evil, will inevitably resurface in more damaging forms, if not acknowledged and worked with. Doubt can also be good when it motivates us to sort out mistaken assumptions. Job, for example, questioned the prevailing theology that “bad people suffer and good people prosper” and that this explained all of life. As he discovered, that is simply not true. All people suffer, good or bad. A questioning faith is not necessarily bad; it can be fruitful, leading to a faith that is founded on the solid ground of truth. And questions often begin as doubt.

Another assumption we should question is the matter of feelings and faith. Many people confuse the two. When we feel good, when things are going well, it is much easier to have faith. But if feelings are confused with faith, we’re in trouble. It is similar to the relationship between feelings and love. If honest, we would admit that our feelings for a loved one can run the full gamut of emotions, good or bad. Who has not hated their parents at some point? Or been ready to strangle their children? Many wonder, at times, whether they are still in love with their spouse. Long-term relationships need something more than feelings to endure the test of time. They require commitment. Feelings are fickle and fragile. Love is made of stronger stuff.

So it is with faith. Your emotions are not the measure of faith. On any given day, depending on whether you’ve had a good night’s sleep or have just stubbed your toe, your feelings can affect your faith. But faith is made of sturdier stuff. It is the accumulation of years of worship, Bible study, prayer, hope. It is affected by the community of faith with whom you rub shoulders every day. But faith is also more than the sum of its parts. Faith is created and nourished by the Holy Spirit – that force that is outside of you, that breathes life into you, into your faith. That’s what sustains you during the dry days of doubt.

We need to be honest about our doubts. And doubt can help us sort out our assumptions. But doubt, left alone, can endanger your faith. Yancey suggests that you find some good “doubt companions,” that is, people who are honest about their doubts, but are also rooted in the fertile ground of faith. People like that anguished father in the Gospels who cried out, “I believe! Help my unbelief!” Find people who have looked doubt in the face with courage, ready to probe more deeply into underlying questions. Dive down into the Psalms, and take fellow divers with you like C.S. Lewis, Philip Yancey, Eugene Peterson or N.T. Wright. These “doubt companions” have struggled with doubt and come up breathing the clear, fresh air of faith. Ask your Christian friends to walk this path with you, with the Holy Spirit as your guide.

You need the company of the faithful. The story is told of a pastor who went out to visit an isolated farmer, who hadn’t been to church in some time. The farmer, being a man of few words, quietly let the pastor in. They sat by the fireside, but said little. Finally the pastor took a stick to separate one glowing coal from the fire. It continued to burn for a while, but finally

grew cold and went out. The farmer stirred and spoke. “You don’t need to say another word, Pastor. I’ll be there next Sunday.”

Some of your best doubt companions can be found right here in church – to be honest. We need each other, especially when faith begins to cool. We need the warmth, the songs, the prayers of others. Sometimes it is the prayers of the faithful that lift you up when you cannot pray for yourself. The Holy Spirit uses many tools when he re-kindles faith, including your faith community.

Once started on the road to faith, keep moving on. Don’t let doubt stop you in your tracks. That was almost the case for Thomas. He had not been with the others on that evening when Jesus first appeared. So he nursed his doubts for yet another week. *But he didn’t stay away.* He joined the others in the Upper Room on that second Sunday. He was there when Jesus appeared again, this time with a special message for his doubting, hurting friend. “Thomas. Put your hands on my wounds. I am real. Stop doubting and believe.” And Thomas responded with the greatest declaration of faith that had yet been uttered. “My Lord and my God!” In the light of faith, Thomas’ doubts vanished. Jesus was there; he was real, and Thomas’ faith was restored.

Now, you might say: “Well yeah, but Thomas had it easy, didn’t he? I mean, he had the visible Jesus right there in front of him, not only visible but tangible. It’s a little different now, isn’t it? I can’t see Jesus, let alone touch him.” And you would have a point.

So in that case, I would encourage you to consider the person of Jesus. What kind of a person was he? Well, from Gospel accounts, we know that people were drawn to him; he was compelling, unlike anyone they had ever met. Yancey says this about Jesus: “His combination of qualities—fierceness and yet compassion, absolute confidence and yet humility, brilliance and yet simplicity—I find in no other human being. For me, Jesus is a trustworthy guide.” I have to say the same. When you encounter Jesus, you cannot forget him. He gets under your skin. A desire is born inside you, to want to know him better, to trust him. Hundreds of people followed Jesus during his three years of ministry. Millions -- billions -- of people have believed and followed him ever since. What about you?

You and I – and every other Christian who ever existed – has struggled with doubt. The Apostle Peter said that the outcome of that struggle is nothing less than the salvation of your soul. It is a more resilient faith, resulting in peace and joy. Jesus is the real deal. The Resurrection is true. Faith, based on this truth, becomes more infectious than doubt.

Thomas was known for his doubt, but once infected by faith, was a changed man. That was also true of all the other disciples. All of them gave their lives to the spreading of the Good News of the Resurrection. Most of them died for their faith. But nothing took away their faith,

their joy, their peace. And what about Thomas? Tradition tells us he went to India, founding what is now called the Mar Thoma Church, established in the 1st century, still in existence today.

My friends, this epidemic will surely try your faith at some point. But be encouraged: your doubts, *in the hands of the Holy Spirit*, will only serve to hone your faith, make it stronger, more resilient. The truth of the Resurrection is real. This truth inspires infectious faith that continues to spread. There is no cure for this infectious faith. It is stronger than any illness or difficulty, and it results in life. It was true for Thomas. It can be true for you.

I'd like to conclude with the poem with which I began. Here it is, in its entirety:

"Yes, doubt does keep gnawing at one's faith."
I said it to a friend, my friend in deep distress.
I said it to encourage, but quickly he replied,
Without a moment's hesitation, "But faith keeps gnawing at our doubts, too!"

It was a great response. I am strengthened by it.

Intending to comfort, I was comforted.

Today I walk more boldly as I say:

Yes, Doubt does gnaw at my faith, but faith gnaws, too,
and faith has better teeth!

(Gerhard Frost, *Bless My Growing*, "Faith Gnaws Too.")