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The gift of doubt  
Martin Grove United Church  
April 23, 2017  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:19-31

This Sunday - we enter into a special time of the year. That space between Easter and Pentecost. The official name for this period of time is the “Season of Easter”. Does anyone know what's so special during this time? Well, I suppose we could start with a general knowledge test: Here's some things that all Christians agree on:

- When was Jesus born? (~2000 years ago)
- When did Jesus die? (on Good Friday)
- And most Christians agree that by Pentecost, which is 50 days after Easter, Jesus was present to the disciples as a spiritual presence.

But here's something that Christians do not agree on:

- When - exactly - did Jesus become a spiritual presence? When was it that Jesus transitioned from being physically present with the disciples to being spiritually present? When did Jesus “head to heaven”?

Options:

- In the gospel of Luke, Jesus leaves on Good Friday. I say that because Jesus tells the one criminal who is crucified beside him: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”
- In the gospel of Mark, and in Matthew, Jesus is already gone by Easter morning. The women find the empty tomb, and a stranger or an angel tells them that Jesus has already left.
- In the book of Acts – Jesus heads for the heavens shortly before Pentecost, as we will read in a few weeks.
- In the Apostle's Creed, the time is vague - it simply says that Jesus ascended into heaven, sometime after Easter.

So - depending on what source you use, there is a window of about 52 days during which Jesus may have headed for heaven - that window of opportunity being from

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Good Friday to Pentecost.

And finally - why are we talking about this? It's because that period from Good Friday to Pentecost is precisely where we find ourselves now. Easter is behind us, and Pentecost lies ahead of us. And I am reminded that the whole issue of when - exactly - Jesus headed to heaven is an issue that has split Christian groups and created whole new denominations. The issue does seem to matter.

And yet, I don't see how 52 days can be all that important. 52 days is less than 5% of the 3 years of Jesus's public ministry. And 52 days is less than 0.01% of the time that has elapsed since Jesus's death. Isn't the important issue the fact that Jesus's spirit lives on, regardless of the exact time that it happened? Isn't it ok to doubt the exact time and place of Jesus's spiritual resurrection? Isn't doubt sometimes a good thing?

Which of course brings us directly to today's story about the disciples recognizing Jesus, and about Thomas being the one who wanted to recognize Jesus in a particular way. As you know, this is the Thomas we often refer to as "doubting Thomas". The issue of doubt comes entirely from the story we read this morning, because Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

But personally, I don't like the label "doubting" applied to Thomas. It seems harsh. It seems unnecessary. It seems unrealistic. Moreover, I'm not sure that the label is even correct - when applied to Thomas.

For one thing - the story makes it sound as if Thomas was the only disciple who had any doubts. But I suspect that a number of disciples would have had doubts. Thomas - however - was brave enough and strong enough to voice those doubts. What sane person would not have had doubts after all that happened during Holy Week? And Thomas is brave too. In John 11, Jesus is about to head to Judea, and the disciples warn him not to go for fear that Jesus will be stoned. And Thomas tells the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Jesus." Thomas is brave. Thomas is brave enough to stand against the other disciples and to freely admit his doubts.

And - more than that - Thomas wanted a first-hand experience of the risen Christ - Thomas didn't want to settle for a second or third-hand story. And because of that

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perhaps we should applaud Thomas. Thomas was not content that the women said they found Jesus at the tomb. Thomas was not content that the other disciples had had an experience of the risen Christ. I suspect that Thomas would not have been content if he had had an early release of the New Testament that proclaimed the living Christ.

Thomas did not accept the testimony of others. Does that mean that Thomas doubted. Or does it mean that Thomas was looking for something deeper - deeper than just hearing a story of the risen Christ. Perhaps it is only possible to look for deeper meaning by doubting - by not taking the stories of others as the final word.

I think that idea works very broadly with our own faith too. Doubt is an essential ingredient for exploring our own faith, recognizing limitations in some of our understandings of God and Jesus - some of which perhaps came to us as children - and moving beyond our earlier thinking. During my time at seminary, I sort of lost count, but I "lost my faith" at least 4 or 5 times. But each time, when I "lost" my earlier understanding of Christian faith, I found a better one! I lost some Christian ideas I had never really reflected on seriously and replaced them with more reflective, thoughtful, believable concepts and ideas. And the seed that led to my better understanding of Christian faith was always doubt.

Thomas should be applauded because he chose to find his own way to make his faith more real. And then he did it. Do you think after the experience that Thomas went through he would ever doubt the risen Christ again? I don't think so. It's ok to lose your faith if you find a better one in the process! And you can do that and remain faithful. It happens all the time, when we seriously consider - what is the Trinity exactly? How can Jesus be divine and human? And perhaps you have your own burning questions of Christian faith.

Thomas held out for his own experience of the risen Christ. For that reason I always think of Thomas - not as doubting Thomas - but as faithful Thomas. Not only did Thomas demand and wait for his own experience of Jesus - but his experience was unique because of it.

And in the story, Thomas's desire for his own personal revelation of Jesus is satisfied. Thomas says that he wants to see Jesus's wounds, and Jesus offers to show his

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wounds to Thomas - to let Thomas touch him. Jesus was not offended by Thomas's doubt. Jesus simply allowed Thomas to touch him and to draw his own conclusions.

Thomas recognized Jesus by his wounds. Thomas recognized Jesus by touch. It sounds to me that Thomas had a very intimate experience. An intimate experience that Thomas would not have had if he had simply believed the "party line" of the disciples.

And what about us? In what ways do we recognize God today. In what ways do we refuse to recognize God in our midst? What symbols embody Jesus or God for you? How about in this church? The cross? The building? Other members of the congregation? Our mission? Our dreams? The music? The coffee?

Where is God in this church for you? And where is God outside this church for you? How do you recognize God outside this sanctuary? At the bus stop? Visiting people in hospital? Visiting people in prison? At a grocery store? Spending time with family? Spending time in nature? In a smile? In a tear? What do you do to find God? What works for you?

Perhaps we should follow the example of Thomas. Thomas the faithful - Thomas the brave. Do we have the courage to follow our own hearts to find our own authentic and intimate experiences of God? We should listen to the experiences of other people, and our traditions too - as helpful ways to get us started of course. But for a truly intimate experience of God we need to be vulnerable to exploring new ways. Exploring new paths. And like Thomas, we might need to follow that path alone, even if we do it with our friends or church family.

As the path into our future unfolds, I hope and pray that we can all be open to our voices within. That we can be open to the voices of the divine. That we - like Thomas - find the bravery we need to express ourselves and to hold out for what we need on our own journey of faith.

Doubting is a gift. Doubting is faith. Doubting is grace. Doubting is life.

Embrace the gift of your own doubts. And find God in intimate ways.

*Amen.*