

Passing Locked Doors

In today's Gospel, shortly after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are meeting in a locked room, for fear of the Jews. The resurrected Jesus appears among them, suddenly. The disciples rejoice. But the locked door of the room is not the only obstacle that Jesus must pass. For the disciple Thomas was not there with the rest of the disciples. When he is told of the meeting with the resurrected Jesus, he does not believe. He doubts. His reaction is not unique. The world is filled with doubting Thomases. Today's Gospel is about God overcoming doubts. You who have come to worship the risen Lord give witness not only to God's triumph over death but his triumph over our doubts and weaknesses as well. Amen!

Do you know someone who doubts God? Do you know someone whose doubts keep them from a relationship with God? Are you afraid for them? Well, do not fear for I have good news, Jesus Christ died on the cross for doubters too. I've known many people who have doubted God. I used to be one of them. They say that they find it hard to believe in the God of the Bible. They come up with all kinds of reasons and arguments to disprove the existence of God. They come up with all kinds of worldly explanations for the miracles of the bible. They make up things about how God should be saying I can't believe in a God who expects us to follow the 10 commandments who always is judging me... "I believe in a loving God who is happy when I am happy, who only does good for us. In my mind, I am thinking "You did not create God." "God created you." God is "what HE says he is" not "what YOU say he should be." And he tells us about himself in His book... the Bible. I would spend hours and hours talking to them, debating with them, trying to explain about God, to them. Yet for every answer I would give they would raise another doubt,... another question.... some other reason "why they couldn't believe in God."

Then one day it dawned on me. All this time I had been sharing the Gospel... I had been missing the mark. All the questions, all the doubts, all the arguments... were "red herrings." A "red herring" is a meaningless argument. In formal debate, you raise "red herrings" arguments to drive your opponent's attention away from the real issue, in particular, to drive the discussion away from an issue you don't want to talk about. (We were just talking about this very subject at our men's IMF bible study yesterday.) I found that what they are actually saying... when they say "I find it hard 'to believe' in God" was that they were saying... "I find it hard "to trust" in God. (REPEATING) When they say "I find it hard to believe in God" what they are actually saying is "I find it hard to TRUST in God. And BECAUSE they do not trust God, they cannot, they will not, follow God. All of a sudden I understood. It was not a knowledge issue. It was a trust issue. So what does this mean? When you talk to such a person, many times it is not book answers they want. They do need the book answers, but there are deeper questions which need to be answered before they are willing to learn. These deeper questions have to do with trust. So, what is it that keeps a person from trusting God? What is it that they have not heard that keeps them from trusting to God? What do they need to hear to trust God? That is what they are (without knowing it) hungering to hear.

There are many things which will keep a person from trusting God. Some people fear “trusting God” because they fear giving up control of their lives. This is probably one of the biggest reasons why people struggle with faith in God. To have faith, is to realize that God is in control... that God loves us... that God has plans of good for us. And in the eyes of this world... a world which is blind to God,... to have this kind of faith is craziness. Other people fear “trusting God” because they fear “being judged” judged by God or “being judged by people in the church.” I feel for these people, because it is literally ignorance which keeps them from trusting God. For the Gospel is nothing but freedom from the consequences of divine judgment. Not only that, but because they fear hearing the judgment of God, they refuse to read the bible. And because they do not read the bible, they miss hearing the Gospel, as well. Others refuse to trust God because they are angry at God, They are angry because of something bad which has happened in their past, a time when they think God let them down. These people need to read the Footprints poem. These people need to know that in times of trouble, God was holding them up. Perhaps God’s plan was not the one they expected. But his plan was one of good, one of love, nonetheless. Some other people are OK with God but they are angry at Christians. Sadly, they allow that anger to block their relationship with God. These people need to experience forgiveness.

While there may be different reasons... each one of these people, deep down inside, hunger for the same thing. Each of them needs to hear the same thing. They need to hear that despite their doubt, God loves them. The good news that we are here to give them is that Christ died even for doubters. The good news is that Christ came down even to the very root of every person’s doubt to bring faith, to bring salvation.

As proof, let us return to our Gospel lesson. After the eleven disciples meet with the resurrected Jesus in the locked room, they tell Thomas the great news. As I said before, Thomas is skeptical. Apparently, the door to the locked room was not the only obstacle that Jesus had to overcome. There was a lock on the door to Thomas’ heart as well. In verse 25 Thomas says "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." What Thomas was saying to the disciples and ultimately to Jesus, too, was “I do not trust what you are saying.” Why would he say that? The answer is: Sin. Because of our sinful nature, every one of us would be capable of saying: I will not believe. It is sin, which causes us to refuse to put God on the altar of our hearts. WE desire to be in control. Even as Christians, because we still carry around our sinful nature, we still fear, we still desire control of our lives. And even though we know that God calls us to obedience. Even though we know that our lives should be under God’s control, we may still fear giving complete control to God. How many of us, like Thomas, wait for the right set of circumstances, AS WE SEE IT, before we are willing to act upon God’s will. How many of us still have places in our lives where we fear to give God complete control and we guard those places with a series of rationalizations. In fact, setting up prerequisites for our personal belief, “for our trust,” becomes a way of forestalling our submission to God. It is pride which says to God, “this is what YOU must do before I submit.” It is an insult to God. And if we continue in this denial, our very relationship with God is in danger.

Yet God is merciful and He loves us. Jesus loved Thomas and did not wish to leave him in this ignorance. From v. 27 Jesus says, "Thomas, Here! "See the holes in my hands. "Thrust your fingers into the wound in my side. Though Thomas insulted Christ through his unbelief. Jesus loved Thomas so much that he came to where Thomas was in his unbelief, and said "here you will not submit in faith, then I will submit to you!" We don't know if Thomas actually touched Jesus' wounds, but what we do know is that Thomas got the message. "My Lord and My God!" In these words, Thomas declared his trust and faith, in Jesus risen from the dead and Jesus his Lord.

The same message comes to us and to all who may doubt. When sinfulness drives anyone to doubt and fear. When fear and pride drive us to make locked doors before God. He comes down to us, in our doubts, and says: Here! See the holes in my hands. Thrust your fingers into the wound in my side. For the good news is that we have nothing to fear, because God loves us. And what is the proof of the love of God, How do we know that he will take care of us? God so loved the world that when we were yet sinners, his enemies, He sent his only son to die for us. to suffer horribly as a man, to have nails pounded into his hands and feet, and to die a humiliating death on a cross. Scripture tells us that no greater love has any man, than he who lays down his life for another. Our God loved us so much that he laid down his life for us. All this for us. So that our relationship with Him could be healed. God's love has always been there. That is the one message that everyone who doubts needs to hear. God loves you. Jesus Christ died for you. It is the one irrefutable evidence to remove all doubt.

In the face of all arguments, questions and doubts which a person puts forth to avoid believing in God, to avoid trusting God, this is the one message which goes to the core of their doubt. For the person who fears to be judged, the answer is Do not fear, God loves you. Jesus Christ died for you so you would not be judged. See the holes in my hands. For the person angry with God because of bad things which happened in their lives, the answer is still God loves you. Jesus Christ died for you. Thrust your fingers into the wound in my side. God did not promise that there would be no suffering for Christians here on Earth. But he has promised that while we yet walk this sinful Earth, he would be beside us to rejoice with us in the good times and comfort us in the bad. He has promised that in the end all things will be made right, and that the things we suffer here on Earth are incomparable to the riches of Heaven. For the one who fears to trust because of loss, illness or death, the answer is still God loves you and he has said he will be with you. Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Even at the loss of a loved one we are comforted by God's promise that we will not be separated forever, for He has promised a wonderful reunion in heaven.

Trust him for he loves you and though the sinful world is out of control, ultimately he is in control. And God is willing to and indeed already has worked out a plan for us, a plan for good for those who love him. Trust him. I pray that whatever fear which binds anyone from fully trusting in God, from fully giving their life to God, be replaced with the love of God, that they might fully trust him. I pray that God use each and every one of us to share God's love comfort and hope with all. And in being done, we all together would be able to say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God."