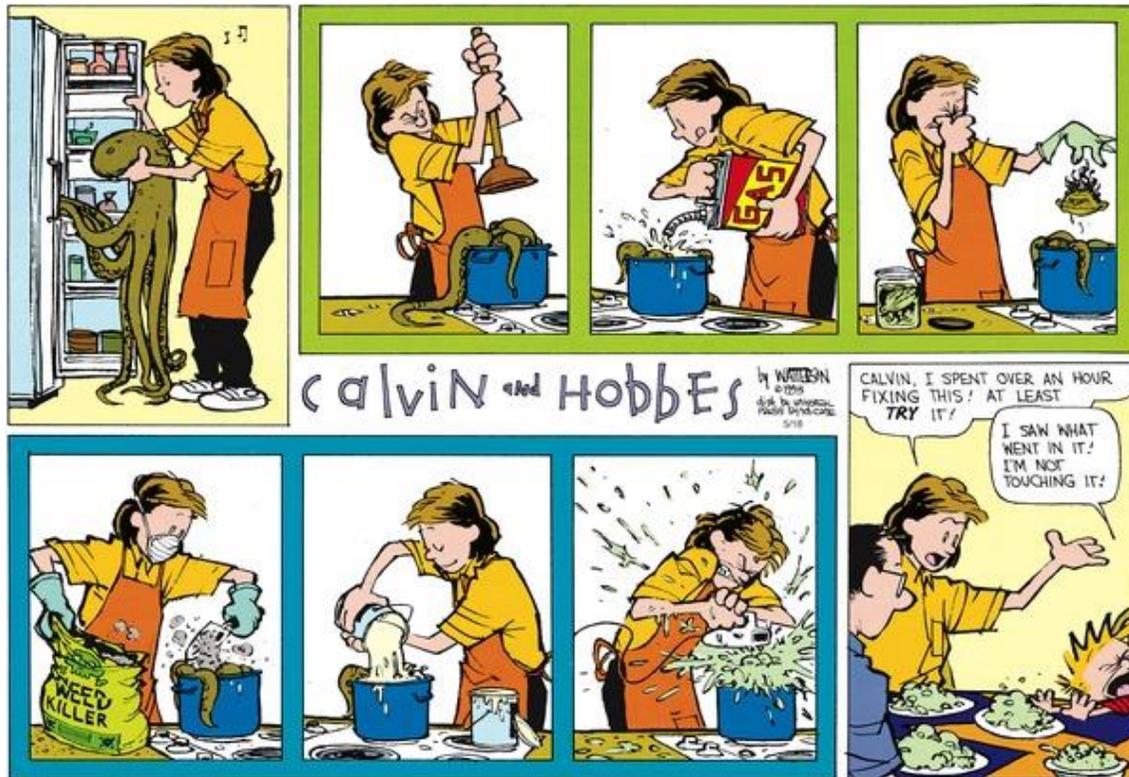


C Easter 2  
 2013 April 7  
 John 20.19-31  
 "About Doubt"



Calvin's mom is cooking: pulls a four foot octopus out of the fridge, mashes it into the pot with a bathroom plunger, gasoline, adds a shrunken head from a jar, a few garden spade fulls of weed killer, a couple of cans of house paint. Mixes it up with a blender. Comes up with some green glop. At the table mom says "I spent over an hour fixing this. At least try it!" Calvin: "I saw what went in it. I'm not touching it!"

"Seeing is believing." The origins of this common saying are lost somewhere in ancient history. Regardless of how the statement came to be, it made some sense at one time. But things have changed. If you have been to the movies recently (or watch them on DVD) you know that Hollywood is able to do some pretty amazing things with special effects these days. In fact, it has become practically impossible to distinguish computer-generated moving images from ones that are actually filmed live.

But the statement has always had some exceptions. And if there's just one exception, we have to wonder how valid the statement is. All of us have seen what appears to be water on the surface of a hot asphalt road. We well know that all we are seeing is an image of the sky, produced by the bending of light by the less-dense air near the road's surface. All of us have been blessed by the breathtaking beauty of a rainbow. But, in spite of it's stunning glory, a rainbow is also an optical illusion.

Thomas isn't concerned about any of these things. In John's gospel Peter and another disciple see the empty tomb on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion. Mary Magdalene actually encounters the resurrected Jesus, speaks to him, touches him, and reports her experiences to the disciples. Then he appears among them in a locked room, reminiscent of a magician's trick. But this, of course, is no trick. So all of the disciples, except Thomas who is absent, see the risen Christ. When they report their experience to him, and in spite of the evidence, he will not believe, insisting on physical proof. "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." Here the Greek word John uses, translated as "mark" can also mean hole or wound.

Thomas won't be content even with seeing. He insists on touching the ragged wounds inflicted on Jesus by his Roman torturers and executioners. The holes left by unyielding nails and the unrelenting point of a spear.

Thomas gets what he insists on having. A week later the risen Christ again appears among the disciples in their locked room. This second time, Thomas is present. Jesus invites him to touch the wounds, his hands and his side. It is not clear if Thomas ever does so. Perhaps he is so overwhelmed by the presence of his teacher and friend that he no longer needs to have the proof he demanded a week earlier. We are not told how Thomas reacts physically, but I can imagine him falling at Jesus' feet. "My Lord and my God!" he exclaims!

Jesus replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That is, of course the message John wants his community to seize and live by, for by the time his gospel is written, many of those who saw and knew Jesus are no longer living on this earth. It is also the message to you and me, Doubting Thomases that we are.

In church language today is sometimes called "Low Sunday," the Sunday after Easter. One astute observer has characterized Low Sunday this way. It is "that anticlimactic day when the entire church staff, having pulled out all the stops for Easter, drags back to church in a state of exhaustion. The trumpets are back in their cases, the lilies are beginning to wilt, the second stringers are in charge of leading worship – and the text of the day brings up the touchy subject of doubt."

The same commentator writes, however, that this passage is actually the climax of John's gospel. The last chapter in the gospel, chapter 21, is actually something of an epilogue, which is not to say that it is unimportant. It definitely is. But it is here at the end of chapter 20 that Jesus elicits declarations of faith from his disciples.

It is good for us to remember that Jesus did not leave his disciples without hope on that horrible day of crucifixion. Just a few days earlier, according to John, he had raised his beloved friend Lazarus from the dead, demonstrating the power of his Father over even death. In his long teaching to his disciples, the Farewell Discourse, on the night he was

arrested, running from chapter 13 through 17, he promises his followers that they will not be left alone, that the Holy Spirit will be with them and beside them. Furthermore, he promises them that they will see him again. Just like he does in the other gospels, Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to happen.

John does something remarkable for us in the final two verses of chapter 20. He tells us why he wrote his account, what his ultimate purpose is. We read in verses 30 and 31, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” That’s it. That’s why John wrote, and that’s what he wants his readers, including you and me, to get.

In John's gospel there are 93 occurrences of some form of the verb “to believe,” while the other gospels contain only some ten or fifteen occurrences each. For John it is critical that we believe Jesus is who he says he is, because in that belief we have life abundant and life eternal.

That’s why it is so important that the eleven remaining disciples seize that faith, that belief. Because they are the ones who will spread this good news throughout the world.

Jesus doesn’t really scold or condemn Thomas for his doubt. In fact, it appears to me that he speaks to Thomas with deep compassion and love. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe!” That is the response of a God who understands Thomas’s doubt and fear. It is the response of a God who understands our doubt and fear.

We encounter Thomas at two other points in John’s gospel. In chapter 11 when Jesus resolves to return to Judea, even though the authorities there are looking to arrest him, Thomas says to his colleagues, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” In chapter 14, Jesus tries to tell his followers about the place where he is going, after his death and resurrection. He uses many figures of speech and metaphors, as he does throughout this gospel. Then he says, “And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas replies in obvious confusion, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

We find in Thomas one who at one point is willing and ready to die for his teacher and Lord. One who at another point is totally confused when Jesus tries to tell him and his friends about what is going to happen. And one who must have proof before he will believe. He is very much like you and me, isn’t he? One day we are on top of our game, fully assured that we do indeed follow a risen and reigning Savior. The next day we read an article or run into someone whose perception is different from ours. Or we suffer some staggering tragedy. And we find ourselves either confused or doubting, or both.

If you have some familiarity with American sign language for deaf persons, you may know that the shorthand sign for “Jesus” is the touching of a fingertip from each hand in the center of the palm of the other, first one then the other. A graphic and powerful reminder that the risen Lord is also a wounded Lord. Jesus’ Father could have chosen to raise his Son without those wounds, but he didn’t. Those wounds were and are immensely important to the disciples’ and the church’s recollection of their Lord. The Lord and God that we follow is a wounded Messiah.

Jesus says to his disciples three times in this passage, “Peace be with you.” These reassurances are a continuation of the words that he spoke to them, recorded by John in chapters 13 through 17, preparing them for his crucifixion and resurrection and departure. After once again promising the presence and help of the Holy Spirit, he says to his disciples in chapter 14, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Jesus speaks in the same way to us.

Note finally the commission that Jesus gives to his disciples in chapter 20, verse 21: “As the father has sent me, so I send you.” It’s on the back wall of our sanctuary. Those men and women from long ago are not the only ones who are sent. Us, too. In the faith that we have, in the belief that we have, as puny and weak as they may be, we are sent out. We are sent out like the first disciples to declare the good news of life abundant and life eternal that is ours simply by believing that this Christ is who he says he is: the Son of God and the Messiah.

That’s what John wants us to have. That’s what Jesus wants us to have. That’s what the Father wants us to have. That’s what the Holy Spirit wants us to have. And we are sent to share that message with the entire world. We do so in what we say and in the way that we live, which means that we must live a life different from the rest of the world. We are to be a peculiar people, believing in a God who died but now lives and reigns. We cannot be perfect, any more than Thomas was. But we can take our belief, in whatever state it may be today, and proclaim with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”