

Order of Service – June 12, 2016
Doubt and Belief, Wounds and Wonder

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- “The wounds of our lives are the doorways to God.”

1st Hymn: Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service, Green 132

Readings -- John 20:19-31

2nd Hymn: Breathe on Me, Breath of God, Green 135

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- Lord, We Believe, Help Thou Our Unbelief

3rd Hymn: Let There Be Peace on Earth, Blue 18

Pastoral reflection or message

Silent worship

4th Hymn: God Be With You, Green 332

Closing -- Blessed are they who doubt.

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Welcome

Good morning Friends. The Franciscan friar Richard Rohr wrote that “*The wounds of our lives are the doorways to God.*” With those words, he was offering a reflection about the story of Doubting Thomas, the man who insisted he must see the wounds of Jesus before he would believe.

It takes a great deal of faith and practice to see God in the wounds of our lives. And I wonder if doubt is its own kind of faith and practice, one way of looking for God in the woundedness of our world.

Poet Albert Huffstickler wrote:

*There is always
that edge of doubt. Trust it. That's where the new things come from....Let
your prayer be: save me from that tempting certainty that leads me back
from the edge, that dark edge where the first light breaks.*

And so we stand together once again here on that edge of doubt, where the first light breaks. And we believe, Lord, help thou our unbelief, that the wounds of our lives might yet be the doorways to God. *So let's sing together our first hymn:*

First Hymn: Lord Whose Love in Humble Service, Green 132

Reading

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."³⁰

Second Hymn: Breathe on Me Breath of God, Green 135

Joys and Concerns,

Interlude

Prayer

Lord, we believe, help thou our unbelief. O God whom we doubt, o God in whom we want to believe, be with us here on the dark edge. We look for the first light as it breaks. Oh One We Are Not Sure Of, be sure of us. Save us. Save us from the tempting certainty, from too easy answers, from claiming to know too much, from lack of wonder. Bless our questions, bless our curiosity and our searching, bless the wonder and the love for your world that lives in our not knowing. Bless our longing, bless our absence when you are present and we are not. Bless our glimmers of understanding, bless our needing and wanting to know. Bless our doubt, the ground where faithful practice grows. Bless our daring to see. In a wounded, wounding world, we wait, and we look, for You. God whom we doubt. God in whom we want to believe. Lord, we believe, help thou our unbelief. God of love, faith, and doubt, believe now in us.

Third Hymn, Let There Be Peace On Earth, Blue 18; children leave

Message

Benediction

Blessed are they who doubt, for their hands shall reach out in love to touch those who are wounded.

Blessed are they who believe, for they shall see the Beloved everywhere.

Blessed are they who doubt, for they shall look and wonder.

Blessed are they who believe, for they shall see everywhere the children of God.

Message

At my sons' elementary school, there is a big bulletin board with the word BE on it. The Letters: B - E. The teachers take turns putting other words around it, so that it has at times said things like "Be Bold," "Be Kind," and "Be Curious." Right now, it says "Be-lieve." And around it are other words: "in each other," "in learning," "in yourselves," "in kindness."

I love this bulletin board. And I affirm the way that the word *believe* is being used on it, because I think that is the way the word is often intended in the New Testament. I think *Believe* often means to "*set your life and your energy and your heart behind*" something important and real and true, even and especially those things that cannot be seen or touched in a conventional sense, but the effects and presence of which can be felt and known. To Believe in something is to Belove it, to call it beloved, and act like it is beloved. This is the way I think we use the word *Believe* when we say something like *Believe in kindness*.

Everyone's heard of Doubting Thomas, the one who did not believe, but doubted. Even my husband George, a self-described agnostic, who had no religious exposure in his upbringing, and has, in the ten years we've been together, confused the Christmas and Easter stories, said, when I told him that I was working on the story of Doubting Thomas for today's message, "Oh, that poor guy."

Yes, *that* poor guy. Doubting Thomas, infamous even to someone unfamiliar with the Bible, the impetus for the aphorism, "seeing is believing." And for Jesus' famous retort: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" It sounds as if that's the moral, the whole point of the story. Those who doubt, who need to see to believe are not included in the category 'blessed.' Those who believe without seeing -- they are the blessed ones.

It sounds that way, and 1000 years of church orthodoxy has trained us to hear it that way, but I think that everything changes if at least part of the

meaning in the word *believe* is *belove*. If it can mean *setting our lives and hearts and energy behind something important, something real*. When I read it this way, and pay close attention to all the words attributed to Jesus, there is less judgemental moralizing and much more blessing in the story. And the blessing begins with the first words of Jesus, when he appears behind the shuttered doors where the disciples huddle in fear, and he says “Peace be with you.”

If these words were on the bulletin board at my sons’ school they would say “Be. With Peace.” *May you have peace with you. Let there be peace with you. There is peace with you.* It’s an invocation, a command, a statement of possibility, maybe even a statement of fact. *All at the same time, in 4 words.* And then the story says something important, something I’ve missed before now, assuming that the whole point of the story is to “tsk tsk” at Thomas: Jesus shows the disciples his wounds, and they rejoice “*when they see the Lord.*” ***Just like Thomas, these disciples, had to see the wounds of Jesus before they recognized him. It is precisely his wounds that make him real to the disciples.*** It is only *because* of his woundedness that they can see who he is, that ***they can recognize him.*** And at that moment of recognition, Jesus repeats his blessing that is also a command: “Peace be with you.” He continues: I am sent by God, and now I send you. Leave this locked house. Open these closed doors. Go forward from here.

At that, there is a visceral demonstration that the same unseen Spirit that lives in Jesus, the same animating force that transmutes and transforms death shall live in them. They are to be vessels of this same Spirit, ***And the whole point is forgiveness.*** If you hold onto the sins of others, Jesus says, those sins will persist, fester, continue. If you forgive the sins of others, then they will know forgiveness. I don’t think this is a bequest of power over others, a privileging of Christians to absolve or convict others of their guilt; I think it is an invitation to live in the kind of freedom and new life that forgiving can provide. Friends, he says, you can choose whether you wish to harbor the sins of others in your own hearts, to catalogue and retain them, or to forgive them, freeing them and yourselves from that kind of living death.

This whole mystical encounter strikes me now as an *exquisite* teaching. The one who carried their best hopes and dreams, who was brutally murdered in the most extreme, humiliating way possible by the domination system of his day, *appears before the followers* who fled and abandoned and denied him at the end, who have barred themselves behind locked doors in fear, and his message is: “*Be at peace. Go Forth from here. Be animated now by the same Holy Spirit that lives and moves in me. Forgive.*”

But our famous friend Thomas missed this extraordinary teaching, and I can't help but relate. I've been absent in my life, too. He says that unless he can see and touch the wounds of the One he has loved, he will not believe that this is real, period. And so, a week later, Thomas *is present* when, Jesus once again finds his way behind the shuttered doors of their fear and dashed hope, and he proclaims again that beautiful benediction and mandate: “Peace be with you.” There is peace with you, he says. Even now when all seems lost. And he declares directly and immediately to Thomas: See. Look now at the terrible woundedness I carry. Reach out your hands and touch these afflictions in the flesh of my hands and my side. Do not doubt but believe.

And it is the next line that haunts Christianity, one of the lines that has troubled mere mortals for millennia, that has pushed people out of the churches and into the places where it is safe to be imperfect or skeptical, metaphorically minded, or a person with questions, or a person who insists on her own experience of the Sacred, someone who refuses to substitute others' encounters with God for his own -- this line is the one that reduced all the other things that Thomas did and all his other qualities into one cautionary shaming nickname forevermore. Jesus says “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

Is the gospel writer having Jesus say that those of us who insist on placing our hands in the ‘wounds of the world’ are not blessed, or are less blessed than those who don't so insist? Maybe that is what the writer intended -- the early church was certainly concerned about orthodoxy -- but an accusatory inflection and an exclusive blessing are not aligned with what have been

sublime and grace-filled blessings from Jesus up until this moment. And I think now that those last words of Jesus can be heard in the same spirit in which the rest of his words seem to have been offered, and their meaning can be enlarged by thinking of the word believe as if it contains that layer of meaning that it contains on the bulletin board at my sons' school. Belove. Read that way, *these words draw a deliberate connection for us and for Thomas between the woundedness of Jesus and the risen-ness of Christ.* They are asking us to remember that both matter, both are real, both are to be *believed*. That is, *Both are to be beloved*. We are to *belove* the wounded Jesus AND the Risen Christ, both the death wounds of the Beloved that we can see and touch, **and** the Beloved Spirit that cannot die, that Lives. When Thomas sees the wounds of Jesus and exclaims *My Lord and My God*, it is the Christ who responds to him, the Christ who says, "*what cannot be seen or touched is also REAL. Blessed are they who know this.*" I no longer think it's an accusing judgement; I think it's pastoral care. Yes, my friend, reach out to my wounds. They are real. *And* don't forget to set your life and heart behind what cannot be seen, what cannot be wounded, what cannot die. That is also real.

For Thomas, what was called his doubt **was the measure of his love**, his willingness to stare into the terrible truth, to not shrink but go toward the full extent of what had happened to the One in whom he believed. It takes a very brave kind of love to put your hands right where it hurts your Beloved the most, where the mortal wounds are. I can't help but think of the ways that people reach for the woundedness of our world, insist upon seeing and touching exactly where the Body is pierced. I think of first responders, and relief workers in conflict zones, and doctors in bombed cities, and scientists studying the shrinking glaciers, measuring exactly the extent of the woundedness of this Body of Christ, this earth. I think of anyone caring for someone they love at the end of life. I think of the man who cradled the body of the 2 year old Syrian boy who washed up on the shore of the Mediterranean last summer. All of these people love deeply and bravely enough to say, "I will see to believe." Seeing is believing. Seeing is *beloving*. When *crucifixion* is real, doubt that insists upon seeing is a fierce kind of defiant devotion.

And I am reminded also that there are **wounds we can't see**, that are also **real**. When Jesus says, *Blessed are those who do not see yet have come to believe*, I think also about the invisible wounds that people all around us carry. I see people. People in parking lots, people driving, endlessly driving, driving driving. people hunched beneath fluorescent lights, people preoccupied and busy or anticipating good things, people scared, people starving, people hoping, people dying, people typing by the blue light of a million tiny flickering screens. People polishing guns. People loading guns. People counting the hours behind cash registers, asking me if I want paper or plastic, people with secret heartbreaks and private hurt, in front of me in line buying a lottery ticket. People behind locked doors, all hope lost. People startled by beauty, people rushing right past it without seeing -- and I think, yes, it's true: blessed are they who believe, though they cannot see, the unseen wounds carried by just about everyone, all around us, every day. And if *we* reach for the wounds of the body of Jesus, we too might be shocked to see before us the presence of the Risen Christ.

So, blessed **are** they who dare the faithful practice of doubt. For the love that impels them to reach for the wounded world will reveal doorways to God. And blessed are they who believe. Who set their lives and hearts behind what cannot be wounded, what cannot be seen, what cannot die. Blessed are all of us. All of us who doubt and believe, and all the ways we believe, this world of wounds and wonder.