

“ReLent: Doubt”

Mark 14:26-31

March 28, 2021

In the fall of 2019, I had the opportunity to engage with a group of young adults in a conversation about their faith. The members of the group were in their twenties and all of them had been raised in some kind of faith community, whether as active members or occasional participants. At this point, the group was split—about half continue to be involved actively in the church, the other half less so, and some not at all. There were many helpful insights in our candid discussion, but one, in particular, was echoed by many in the group. It had to do with doubt, specifically the assumption that uncertainty is discordant with faithful living. What I heard was a deep appreciation and desire for authenticity—for honesty about what we believe and what we struggle to believe. And, a sense that those lingering doubts would be obstacles to full participation in a faith community.

I think this is a pervasive perception. A Methodist pastor in Tennessee published a book a few years ago with the intriguing title, “What’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?” Now, if that question has never occurred to you, then God bless you. But for most of us, it is a persistent, pesky voice that is difficult to silence. There is a relentless wrestling match between conviction and skepticism, faith and doubt, in our hearts and minds. We have in mind a minimum, a threshold of belief that must be met before we truly belong to the club.

Tragically, this perception of the church as a place for believers who have overcome doubt and mastered faith leaves almost all of us on the outside. In my experience, this distorted picture can only be overcome through vulnerable community with other followers of Christ who struggle to believe and who choose to share that struggle. Faith must be understood not as a destination to be reached on

this side of eternity but as a journey to be shared. There are moments on the journey when I am overwhelmed by a sense of God’s powerful presence and faith comes easily to me. Often those moments occur in worship; other times I am surprised by a sudden glimpse of grace in an unexpected place. The kind words of a stranger; the beauty of a spring day; the joy of shared laughter; the freedom of an unscheduled afternoon; tender moments when the sacred is unmistakable.

But those moments are not every moment. This journey takes us all through dry deserts and valleys of doubt as well. Moments when I wonder why God is so silent, so difficult to see at work in a broken and troubled world. Experiences of grief or pain, accounts of injustice, and acts of violence that raise vexing questions and trouble the waters of conviction. I don’t think faith and doubt exist as mutually exclusive arenas of life—I once lived in doubt, now I’ve moved permanently to faith—but rather as interwoven strands in the fabric of our lives. I love the way Rachel Held Evans, an extraordinary theologian who wrote eloquently about the church and died tragically in 2019 at the age of thirty-eight, described this journey: “Doubt is the mechanism by which faith evolves and matures. It’s the only way we can [discard] false fundamentals that obscure and sometimes poison the gospel.” Perhaps we would do well to dismiss the assumed dichotomy between faith and doubt, and instead, welcome their inseparability.

The scriptures of our tradition point to this kind of dynamic interaction between faith and doubt, and nowhere more than in the narratives that describe the final week of Jesus’ life—this week we call Holy.

The story begins with joyful celebration. Jesus

comes to Jerusalem, the city of David, echoing the actions and evoking the words of that great king who was also his ancestor. He tells his disciples he needs to ride a donkey. They would have known why. A new king has arrived. The donkey was a sign of victory and a symbol of royalty for the people in that town. And so they celebrated. That Sunday morning had the feel of a block party. People singing in the streets. Waving palm trees like victory flags. Rolling out the red carpet, or at least the cloaks from their backs, for the one who they hoped would fulfill the promises made by David. Anything is possible as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. Faith flows freely through that gathered crowd.

Though the gospel writer Mark does not name them, I would be willing to wager that Peter was one of those two disciples who went ahead to acquire that donkey. In fact, I imagine him a bit like our sons anticipating the donkey procession this afternoon here at Second. Such a response would have fit Peter's personality perfectly. Just three chapters ago, he offered the boldest and most confident profession of unflappable faith in Jesus. He says with conviction, "You are the Messiah." Peter knew it deep in his heart. So, with the rest of the crowd, he joins in celebrating Jesus as King and Lord. On this Palm Sunday, Peter's faith is soaring.

Alas, it is a long week. The journey continues and events don't go the way Peter and the crowd had expected or hoped. The authorities in Jerusalem turn on Jesus and the exuberance turns to fear. The second part of this morning's scripture picks up the story after Jesus' last supper with his disciples. It's late Thursday evening. The mood of that Passover dinner had been somber, with predictions of betrayal and startling descriptions of Jesus' body broken and blood poured out. As they depart, Jesus offers another sobering prediction, this time borrowed from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, that the disciples will desert him in the days ahead.

Peter, bless his heart, simply won't have it. All this talk of betrayal and denial is more than he can take.

And so, true to form, he swears a promise of absolute fidelity, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I will not. Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." The rest of the week does not go well for Peter; his promise ages quickly...and poorly. He falls asleep in the garden when Jesus asks him to pray. He stands at a safe distance as Jesus is sent to trial. He does not die with Jesus but he does deny him, not just once. Three times.

In the contest between faith and doubt, it is doubt that claims the victory late in a week that began with such potent possibility. Like all of us, Peter struggles to believe what he once knew deep in his heart—that Jesus is the Messiah; that God is in charge; that life is stronger than death, and love is greater than fear. Like all of us, Peter cannot find the faith he boldly professed when things begin to spin out of control. You know the feeling. It's the 3:00 am phone call. It's the daunting diagnosis. It's the unthinkable loss, the bitter conflict, the accumulated disappointment, the tightening grip of fear, the weekly witness to a world gone so horribly wrong. We doubt. Skepticism seizes us. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. Jesus belongs on the throne, not a cross. And Peter should be at his right hand, not scattered with the other sheep.

The triumph of doubt. Those moments in the courtyard of the High Priest might be the saddest of Peter's life—he fails to live up to his convictions or keep his promises. He might have been tempted to end it all as Judas did, or simply to disappear, return to his life as a fisherman and try to forget this whole episode. We too are tempted to leave faith behind when it fails us...or when we fail it. When the foundations of our convictions are shaken, it can seem sensible to abandon them altogether, to relent faith.

But here's the wondrous thing, the miraculous thing, the reason I couldn't wait to share this sermon with you today. Peter's story is not finished. Doubt is not his final destination. It's part of the journey. The road goes on for Peter; his failures are not the end. In fact, they open him to a new chapter—they offer

him the opportunity to begin, again. And so they can for us as well. These moments of doubt, these struggles with uncertainty, even denial, can be the most important experiences of our lives, they can be our greatest teachers, our clearest markers of a new direction. This is what I wanted to say to that group of twenty-somethings: doubt is an invitation to a new way of understanding and maybe even a new way of living. It doesn't mean you don't care, it means you care enough to seek an authentic faith. This is what I want to say to myself and to all of you: don't give up on faith so easily. Doubt your doubt as much as you doubt your faith. Neither one tells your whole story. The constant on this winding road of life is not human fidelity but divine grace. Thanks be to God.

Relenting doubt might mean letting go of our need for airtight certainty or overwrought self-confidence, as it did for Peter. Giving up the notion that faith is an "all or nothing" proposition. Releasing a definition of faith that is restricted only to abstract belief or dogged assertion.

The most profound meaning of faith I know is contained in the Latin verb, *credo*. It does not merely mean, "I believe." It means, "I give my heart to..." When we give our heart to something (or someone) we are committing ourselves to a lifelong journey. On that journey, there will be mountain-top experiences of absolute conviction and there will be valleys of doubt and even despair. The point is not to avoid those valleys; the call is to continue the journey, to risk the pain, to offer your heart in vulnerable love.

This week, will you give your heart to the promise of new life waiting just around the corner? Can you doubt your doubts and lean into the possibility of authentic faith, found not in an unbending catalog of beliefs but in a journey of discovery? Peter might have failed the test in the courtyard, but it was not his final exam.

Just a few days later, one week from that joyful entrance into Jerusalem, three women rose early in the morning. At sunrise, they walked into the tomb

of a crucified friend. The news they received was that the journey of Jesus was not over. The command they are given is quite specific. We've heard the words before. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you..." In that promise, we find the courage to continue, come what may. I will go before you. And so he will. And so he does. And so he always does.

Give him your heart and be at peace. Amen.