

April 11th, 2021

John 20:19-31 “The Myth of Shame”

Last week I was talking about how challenging it can be sometimes to preach on gospel texts that are in the lectionary every year. Here's another one I forgot to mention. We get it every year the week after Easter. John, chapter 20, verses 19-21. Most folks call this the story of “Doubting Thomas.” And even though it comes up every year, and even though there are three other perfectly good texts to choose from, I usually include the story of “Doubting Thomas.” Maybe it's because I have such a big issue with that label: “Doubting Thomas.” It's not fair to Thomas, that's for sure. I saw this great comic strip in a ministry journal a few weeks ago. Peter and Thomas were hanging out, and Thomas turns to Peter and says, “Why doesn't anybody ever calls you, ‘Denying Peter?’” No kidding! Peter gets called, “The Rock on which I shall build my church” after he confesses that Jesus is the Christ and Son of the Living God. There are *so* many names that we could ascribe to Peter. Nobody calls him “Sinking Peter” because he didn't have enough faith to walk on water! Nobody calls him “Slow Peter” or “Peter the Tortoise” because he lost a foot race with John on the way to the empty tomb ... with a head start I might add! But poor Thomas. “Doubting Thomas.” He has become the target of shame and blame throughout the centuries. But that's not surprising because it seems that shame and blame have been the centerpiece of the human existence since day one. Think about it. The earliest story in the Bible is all about shame and blame. God told Adam and Eve not to eat fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But then the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit and she did. Adam came along and Eve convinced him to eat the fruit as well. Suddenly they were so ashamed of their disobedience that they made clothes out of leaves to hide their nakedness. God noticed and confronted them about eating the fruit. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. Thus began the cycle of shame and blame that has followed human beings ever since.

Some say that shame and blame are a necessary part of human existence ... that shame's purpose is to keep people from doing bad deeds. Did you lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead at another person's expense? You *should* feel shame when the person suffers because of your selfishness. Blame isn't so bad either when we use words like "culpability" and "liability." Those are courtroom words, and the purpose of putting someone on trial is to determine whether they are responsible for a crime against another person. Someone has to be blamed for a crime in order for justice to be done. But that's not the kind of shame I'm talking about this morning. I'm talking about the sort of toxic shame that happens when we allow ourselves to be defined by something we have no control over. I'm talking about the shame that plays over and over in our minds like a broken record. "You failed." Or, "It's your fault that you were a victim of abuse or a crime." Or, "It's your fault that you suffer from depression, or diabetes, or high blood pressure or any other inherited illness that you may suffer. It's the kind of shame that others place upon us where it becomes difficult for us to ever see ourselves as a person with worth and dignity. This is especially difficult if this is placed on a child. When the child becomes an adult they feel like they have to keep everything hidden in the shadows and that they'll never be able to deal with their "real" issues.

I think the story of "Doubting Thomas" is a prime example of this type of toxic shame and blame. We want to shame Thomas for his unbelief. We want to shame Thomas because he doubted Jesus. But here's something to think about. Thomas did *not* doubt Jesus. Yes, you heard me correctly. Thomas did not doubt Jesus. Thomas doubted the other disciples. Right? The story goes like this – Eight days after the resurrection, the disciples were hiding behind the locked door of a house when Jesus visited them. He said, "Peace be with you!" It surprised the heck out of them too. They weren't expecting him to drop in. Then he blessed them, gave them the Holy Spirit and told them how important it is to forgive others' sins, especially if they want their sins to be forgiven. But Thomas wasn't there. Later, when Thomas came back to the house, the disciples told him Jesus had been there. Thomas said, "Really?"

Listen, I'm not going to believe you unless I see for myself!" Then, of course, Jesus came back when Thomas was there, Thomas confessed, and Jesus said, "Do you believe because you've seen me? Blessed are the ones who haven't seen but still believe!" And for 2,000 years after, we call people who have difficulty believing in something that seems perfectly evident "Doubting Thomases." This is especially true if someone has a hard time believing in Jesus. "Don't be a doubting Thomas! Doubting Thomases make Jesus cry. Do you want to make Jesus cry? Because that's what will happen if you're a doubting Thomas." Meanwhile slow, denying, sinking Peter gets "St. Peter's Basilica" in the Vatican and is recognized as the first Pope in the Holy Roman Catholic Church!

Maybe Thomas isn't the one we should be looking down upon! Thomas did not want *anything* that the disciples or the women at the tomb hadn't gotten themselves. He was no less a believer than any of them. He didn't doubt Jesus – he doubted their testimony. And for good reason I might add! Think about this for a minute: If Jesus has risen from the dead eight days earlier, why were the disciples hiding in a dark room? Verse 19 says it clearly – They were *afraid* of the Jewish authorities! They were acting in fear. Well that's funny because fear didn't keep Peter the Tortoise and John the Rabbit from sprinting to the tomb when they heard the body was gone! After they went to the tomb and saw that the body was gone, they returned home and locked the door again. So why were they locked in a room after they heard that Jesus was risen? Now that they're facing the reality of the resurrection, why all of a sudden are they paralyzed with fear? If Christ is risen, then why are they acting as if he *hadn't*? And a sad reality about this whole situation is what I'm doing right now. I'm shaming and blaming the disciples for shaming and blaming Thomas, thus creating an avalanche of shame and blame that has been passed on for the last 2,000 years! Shame on you Doubting Thomas. See what you get when you doubt?

How do we end this? What sort of lesson can we learn from this story without pointing fingers and calling people names? Let's see what we

can do to break this cycle. Let's put an end to this mess we're in. And let's start by de-toxifying the word "doubt." Doubt isn't bad. Think about how many times we use this passage in John to highlight the difference between faith and doubt by suggesting that doubt is bad and is somehow the *opposite* of faith. Doubt isn't bad and doubt is *not* the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is certitude. At least that's what the theologian Paul Tillich said. But two of my favorite authors, Brene Brown and Ann Lamott say this often as well. I recognize how strange it sounds too. "The opposite of faith is certainty." But think about it. When we become certain, we turn into dense, immovable objects. We become like stones. When we become certain that things are a particular way, there is no changing our minds. When we're not open to change, that means we're not open to something new. Something new makes us feel uncomfortable. Uncertainty itself feels uncomfortable and scary. We cling to certainty because it helps us feel like we know what we're doing, we know what's going on, and that we're safe and in control. The problem is that certainty and control are just illusions. We only think we're in control. We only think we're certain. We've sure learned that lesson over the past year, haven't we? What I've learned over the years is that certitude leaves very little room for wonder on our part, or for mystery on God's part.

Yeah, but isn't religion all about seeking answers to questions so that we can *be* certain? Well, there's nothing wrong with asking questions, for sure, and there's nothing wrong with seeking understanding. But is "certainty" really what we're after? I think what we end up wanting is to find ways to explain away the mystery so that there is an air-tight argument for God. The problem is that this approach eliminates the possibility of doubt as a reasonable way to seek to know God better. And in our culture, doubt is seen as a lack of faith or as an expression of our skepticism of God's very existence. We seem to think that if we can't fully understand or agree with everything the church teaches, then we just can't believe in any of it. So how do we invite our doubts to help shape our understanding of God? How can we re-think doubt,

which we are shamed for, as a tool of our faith, rather than an obstacle to it?

As I said earlier, when we think we are certain, we become like stones. But we are Easter people. We are people of the resurrection. And we know what happens to stones in the resurrection story. They are rolled away to reveal something miraculous inside. May we boldly, unashamedly embrace the mystery of the empty tomb, and join with our siblings in Christ world-wide in saying, “Christ is risen!”