

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201804040726)

Do not be afraid of questions!

In nomine...

I. Intro

A friend of mine, the Rev. Canon Andrea McMillin, once told me about an encounter she had with her daughters. Sophia and Clara were riding in the backseat while Andrea drove. Sophia was tip-toeing into her teenage years and trying to figure out what that was all about. This particular week was a big one for her. As they drove along, Andrea heard a tentative, “Mom?”

Andrea answered, “Yes, Sophia?”

“I don’t believe in God any more.”

At this point, said Andrea, she started thinking hard. What was the right response? She was an Episcopal priest and her child was denying faith altogether. Her younger child was there, too, all ears and listening to how this played out.

A life without Jesus Christ was not the life Andrea wanted for her daughter. But arguing didn’t seem like the right answer. Andrea wanted to respect the integrity of her daughter’s questioning. How should she respond?

After a moment, Andrea replied, “Well, Sophia, I’m proud of you. Questioning your faith is an important stage in every Christian’s journey. To believe is to make your faith your own, setting aside the things that have been handed to you and figuring out for yourself what makes sense. I’m proud that you’ve come to this place and hope you will keep working on it.”

I was impressed by Andrea’s wisdom and her capacity to step out of her own anxiety in order to care for the soul of her growing daughter.

II. Thesis

Our theme this Eastertide is “Do not be afraid!” That was the encouragement offered by the angel to Mary, Mary, and Salome last week when they encountered the empty tomb. That is the encouragement offered three times this week by Jesus as he encounters his disciples: Peace be with you! Do not be afraid!

Of the many things that Christians might be tempted to be afraid of, one that has a fraught history is a fear of questions and intellectual vigor. Christians are often deathly afraid of being wrong.

When Christians, especially Christians with power in a hierarchical system like the Western Church, are unsure of their own faith, they have difficulty countenancing the questions of others. And so you’ll find would-be believers over-compensating for their own lack of faith by masking it with snappy platitudes, answers that are too simple to stand up to messy reality, and a shrill insistence that others see things their way. It’s like the old joke about an acronym in the margins of preachers’ sermon notes: PWSL. “Point weak, shout louder.”

This is why I’m glad that Thomas’ story was included in the Bible and why I’m proud to be in a church named after him. Every year we read this story on the Sunday after Easter: it’s an important one. The Christian faith has nothing to fear from intellectual struggle. The Christian faith is not an easy thing to understand or to believe, and there is nothing odd or unusual or deficient about anyone who struggles with it. In fact, I would argue, there is no Christian belief without struggle. As Andrea explained to her daughter, it’s part of the journey.

Imagine what Thomas was dealing with. It was the same thing we talked about Mary and Mary and Salome struggling with last week. Resurrection is not an easy idea! Dead people don’t just show up in church, smiling and taking part! Yet Jesus appeared to the whole band of disciples, except Thomas. Thomas wasn’t there that Sunday. This is why you shouldn’t skip church! You never know what’s going to happen!

Thomas refused to believe because faith is too important to adopt simply because “you’re supposed to.” Thomas wasn’t just going to go along with his friends’ insanity. Thomas knew that life is too hard, too brutal, to risk a light-weight assent to the impossible. Thomas was looking for something that would stand up to harsh reality, something he could cling to.

III. Good News

Faith is not an easy thing to come by. Faith is not something to be taken up lightly, because it promises to reorient your entire life from top to bottom. Do not be afraid: faith does not ask you to believe untrue things, but instead to take your time and discover what is most true. Faith is not a decoration or a prop, like a necklace or a Bible or a stole. Faith is not a manner of speech or a set of ideas or a code of conduct. Faith is not a mind-game, it is not a set of propositions to memorize, it is not a competition, and there is not an exam at the end.

Instead, faith is a process, a relationship. Faith is like the relationship you have with your best friend or, ideally, with your spouse. It is a relationship of trust based not on promises and hopes, but on hard-won experience and the testing of life through time. It is a relationship that is solid, something you can count on when everything else in your world goes sideways.

Faith is a journey in relationship with the living God who created the world, who lived as a person named Jesus of Nazareth, who continues to live in us as the Holy Breath of God.

So you might wonder, if it's not in rules or codes or propositions or artifacts, where can faith be developed? I'm glad you asked!

Faith is found in community. It is when the disciples gathered on a Sunday that Jesus appeared in their midst and hushed their fears.

To this day, disciples of Jesus still like to gather on Sundays. Here at church we meet God in Scripture, read aloud and heard together. We meet God in the Eucharist, which begins with us passing the peace, a symbol and a sign of our unity and forgiveness to one another. We meet God in community because God's nature is community: that is the mystery of the Trinity.

Some of us show up at church some weeks not really sure what we believe. Several people in multiple congregations have told me they are atheists and they come because of some reason or another. I always tell them they're welcome, because as Anglicans we agree to not believe the same things but to worship together.

Because it is as we worship together, as we struggle together, that we encounter God and come to know God in relationship. In church we learn the tools and disciplines of faith. We find encouragement in the examples of those who have gone before us, who have persevered in the struggle and found it worthwhile. In church we find companions for our journey of faith among both the living and the dead. In church we learn to invest the time and effort it takes to develop genuine faith.

IV. Invitation

So do not be afraid: believing in God does not require you to check your brain at the door! And believing in God is not a requirement for coming to church! Faith isn't something you do: it is something that happens to you as you make space for it and learn to entrust yourself to the community that bears the name of Christ. Faith is not something you can get wrong! It is simply something you grow into at your own pace.

This week the world observed the 50th anniversary of the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. Here at St. Thomas, just after 7pm, our church bell tolled 39 times for the number of years Dr. King had lived when he was murdered. Dr. King was under intense pressure for much of his adult life. Being at the fore-front of the Civil Rights Movement, he was under intense scrutiny and in conflict with governmental and individual opponents on every side. Dr. King wouldn't have survived on a little half-way faith of verbal assent and mere symbols. Dr. King's faith was deep and abiding and carried him through the work set before him, so that even death did not stop his impact on our country and our world.

Do not be afraid! Like Andrea's daughter Sophia, you may have to strip away some cultural beliefs before you can sort out what is genuinely helpful and authentic in your life. It can be a scary process, but the church is here to support you in it. That is what we do.

Do not be afraid! There is no gain without risk. You have come to the right place to continue your own spiritual journey, to be called upward and inward. According to the biblical witness, "Church" is where Jesus seems to like to show up. Keep looking, and you will develop the eyes of faith that enable you to find him here. Do not be afraid!

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