

“Show Me!”

1

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, April 15, 2007

Sermon Text: John 20:19-31

Last Sunday was Easter, the highest and most holy moment of worship in the Christian calendar, and today the Sunday after Easter, is the lowest, one of the lowest points. Not as low as Good Friday, but one of the lowest points because it's the Sunday we talk about doubting Thomas, so I thought I would come down on the level as we begin to level with you about doubt.

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to begin with a story that I did not tell this morning, a very painful story about a funeral I was once asked to do. The funeral of a woman, a youngish woman. I'm almost 50. She was 30. That's youngish. She died suddenly. I did not know her. She was merely the employee of one of my members. I agreed to do the funeral. Not knowing her, I met with the family, and I met with friends to find out everything I could about her. I found out that her mother, because of her daughter's unexpected and young death, was just more than heartbroken. She was enraged. She was bitter and she was rageful, and she refused even to speak with me. I got all the information that I could. I did the funeral service. Afterwards, she seemed to be trying to undo every bit of hope that I had offered in Christ, and I had spoken to people, who had spoken to me about the young woman's faith, but as people were offering their condolences, the mother was saying, "There is no God. There's nothing after this. My daughter's gone, and if there's a good God, why did He let her die? There is no God." Over and over and over again. It was painful to watch, and painful to hear. I prayed for her. I did the service as I would always do offering the hope of Christ. I then began to wonder what she was going through, and I started to see in my mind, what if one of my adult children had died suddenly? Would I feel forsaken? Would I feel angry? I thought, maybe, maybe I would. In the middle of her rage, in the middle of her bitterness, I thought for her in that moment, for her in her heart, whether she had ever had faith or not. For her the proclamation that there was no God for her in that moment was true. She was so filled with anger there was no room for belief, not even doubt, but only anger.

We all have suffered, perhaps not in that sort of trauma, but in different crises and dark nights of the soul, we have suffered doubts of one kind or another. I'm going to maybe bring a different attitude on it, and it might not be pleasing to you. I usually have a funny story or two in my sermons. I don't think I have one today. I used them all up last week.

I think there's a certain arrogance about doubt. I want you to think about it, the arrogance. If I cannot understand it, if I cannot fathom it, if I cannot figure it out, then it cannot be! It cannot happen! It cannot exist!

I'll make an analogy that's a little bit off the wall, but you know, I can't figure out how they built the pyramids. I can't. Ancient Egyptians cannot possibly have built the

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, April 15, 2007

pyramids, and yet, there they are! There they are. Some proofs of God come in much the same way.

I want you to think about these ragged men we call the apostles. None of them were learned. No one of them was extraordinary in any way. All scattered and scared and broken after the cross, and locked behind doors. Scripture tells us plainly they locked the doors. They even shuttered the windows, and they hid out of fear, out of self-preservation, out of doubt. These all too human, all too fearful, and all into doubt and despair disciples somehow they saw something that changed their minds, that changed their hearts, and gave them backbones of steel later on. They came out of their safe house later on, and they openly preached the Gospel. Something happened! They saw something. They understood something differently that changed them utterly and completely from base cowards into fearless preachers, who spread the Gospel and built the church, which has been preserved unto our hearing.

What fact, what encounter transmuted these cowardly disciples into fearless apostles? It was, Scripture tells us, an encounter with the risen Christ. Even if you have doubts, the question is yours to answer. Just as the pyramids are plainly there and someone built them, this church is plainly here, and I mean the Church. The disciples did not stay locked away in a safe house. They came out, no longer cowards, and they built the foundation of Christendom, and they preached the Gospel of forgiveness and grace and eternal hope. Where did they get that hope? From an encounter with the risen Christ. I don't think anything less than that would do.

Much doubt though comes from the same place the disciples' doubt came from. It comes from self-doubt. I cannot do it! I cannot risk it! I cannot give that unless I am convinced that it is all true, every bit of it! Until then, I'm going to stand back. I'm going to hold back.

I know about self-doubt when asked to do impossible things. When I was a student pastor up outside of Raleigh, NC, I once got a phone call. The senior pastor was not there, and the experienced, wise secretary was not there. I alone was there, and no locked door or shuttered window could stop the phone from ringing so I answered it. I thought, “I'm smarter than average. I test well anyway. I'm a Duke student! I can handle anything that's on the other end of this phone!” So I said, “Hello?” On the other end of that phone was a woman named Billie. I'd never met her. Also, on the other end of that phone was a challenge from God for my overdeveloped sense of self-sufficiency. Billie was a large, imposing woman, who had been in and out of the North Carolina State Mental Hospital, and she told me that she needed help right now. My confidence began to slip away. As she said that she was going to be committed again, and that the state trooper car was on the way, and that her husband, who had just gotten out of prison, was there, and maybe could take care of their young daughter, but maybe I needed to find her mother. I had never met any of these people. They were simply on the roll. She needed help from God, and I had dared to answer the phone in God's church. I hung up, and I looked up at the ceiling, and I said, “God, this is not funny! This is not funny! You

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, April 15, 2007

know that I haven't had a course in crisis intervention yet, and I don't even own a book of worship, and if I did, I'm sure there is not a proper prayer for an impending committal and the soothing of a daughter, who has to stay with a father she has never really known. There's no such prayer. I can't do this!" I said to God, "You will have to do this!" I prayed, "Lord, you promised to give me words when I stand and represent You. You're going to have to do it now. You promised. Now, you're going to have to do it. You have to because I have no idea what to do and what to say." I went and I got some proof. I got some proof. God was with me in that situation. I did not go alone and afraid. I went with God's spirit giving me courage and words that I had never been taught, words I didn't know from where they were coming, and I don't think I could have constructed them if I'd had a week to put together a prayer, but somehow or another, I just shut up and got out of the way, and God happened through me!

My doubts were self-serving! My doubts wanted to run and hide! My doubts wanted to use my mind to reason a way out of this! There was no one else there, and I had not time to pass the buck. The trooper was on the way. God had walked right through the phone line and confronted me with a crisis of faith. Jim, do you really believe? I found out that I did only by going in over my head, beyond my experience, beyond my comfort zone, and praying all the way! I found out that yes, God could change a coward into a disciple!

John Wesley is an honest model of moving through doubts in self and faith to a stronger belief and a stronger trust in God. Wesley wrote in his journal March 4, 1738, after he'd already been a missionary to the wilds of Georgia with General Oglethorpe down there, but he was beginning to doubt his faith. Wesley said that he was clearly convinced of his own unbelief and of the lack of that faith whereby alone we are saved. He was convinced he didn't have it. He wrote that in his journal.

Now was it a self-serving doubt? I think so. His first reaction was to quit preaching, to just stop. He reasoned that it was impossible to preach to others when he did not have faith himself. Can you hear the doors slamming and the windows' shutters closing? Wesley wrote, "I asked my friend Bohler whether he thought I should leave or not," and his friend said, "By no means!" Wesley asked, "But what can I preach? I don't know what I believe!" Bohler, his friend, said, "Preach faith 'til you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith." I'm sure he had to say that twice. Preach faith 'til you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith.

Now, the first person in his journal that it is recorded he preached to was a prisoner, and up until his encounter with Bohler, he had not believed that God could redeem such a criminal man. Wesley had not. Now, as he was humbled by his own weak faith, he obediently allowed himself to be used by God and he witnessed to this prisoner as one sinner to another.

Having doubts is sometimes a way to avoid being used by God. Working through your doubts is the way to become more useful to God and to grow within you a faith that is real and reaches out beyond what you alone can do or what you can understand.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, April 15, 2007

I am truly dubious, in other words, I doubt people, who say they have never had any doubts. The prophets had doubts. The disciples had doubts, and on the cross even Jesus felt abandoned and alone when He cried out, “My Lord, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Are there really human beings who have never had any doubts? Never felt alone and forsaken by God? Who have never suffered a dark night of the soul? You know, Peter with great faith got out to walk on the water, and then he began to fear and have doubts, and he began to sink. Elijah was a strong and powerful prophet, but at one point, he ran and hid in a cave. Even John the Baptist seemed uncertain at first whether Jesus was the one or should we expect another. In Mark, I love this man, he’s not mentioned except in one verse, we hear of a man who honestly mixes faith and doubt saying to Jesus, “Lord, I do believe, help thou my unbelief.” All at once, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief! Mark 9:24.

Even after the resurrection and after seeing Jesus, some of the disciples still doubted. It’s recorded at the very end of Matthew. Our Bible is a record of doubt and weak faith being overcome in the struggle with God. Remember, you’ve all learned this at some point and maybe forgotten, the name Israel actually means “one who struggles with God.” It’s a family tradition! It is a family tradition among the children of God to struggle and grow beyond doubt, and it has been from the beginning.

Jesus encouraged us to use the tiny little bitty mustard seed faith we have, and while using it, God will enable it to grow larger and for us to become more useful. Faith grows as you use it. People who recognize and work through their doubts, I think, end up with stronger faith. Now, some of you have doubts, I know, because of things that have happened in the church, maybe this church or some other church, or because of behavior of people in the church, or of past ministers. Notice I didn’t say current minister.

I want you to please stop doing that. Do not confuse faith in God with betrayal or bad behavior from some fellow sinner. That happens inside and outside the church, and that is going to happen. We all have doubts; of course, we have some doubts of some sort. Look at all the lies we see in the world and even in our extended relations, and look at all the injustice, the violence, and the death and the hypocrisy, and we sit here judging others and sometimes questioning God, but a careful reading of the Bible, a careful reading of the Bible will reveal that this world as it is now is not what God had in mind. God said that the creation was good and that God is good, but the creation is no longer good because of our sin.

From the very beginning, when Cain killed his brother Abel, creation and the very earth itself cried out. The earth, as it absorbed his blood from the murder, cried out for justice, for his innocent blood.

We doubt and then we blame God, saying “God, if you are a good God, then why do these things happen?” Many of these things, not all, but many of them happen because

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, April 15, 2007

we are a part of the equation, and we are free to sin, and sin we do. Most of the things we doubt about lay not at God’s feet, but at our own.

If you have no doubts now, if you’ve worked through them, good! That’s our aim. Remember there was a time back in your baby faith, back in your mustard seed faith, when you did have doubts, and so when you meet someone with doubts in the middle of a crisis, give them some grace. Cut them some slack. Thomas’ words finally were a tremendous affirmation of faith, “My Lord and my God.” It came as a statement of faith based upon complete trust, but it was a faith forged in the fire of doubt.

Alfred Lord Tennyson put it this way. He said, “There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds.” Doubting may well be an essential piece in the process of coming to faith and trust. Serious doubt is a confirmation of faith in the making, asking questions and trusting God that there may actually be answers. Asking questions and being open to a God who answers.

Notice also the reasons to believe not just the reasons to doubt. Someone has said faith is knowing there is an ocean because you have seen a brook, and it travels somewhere. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.”

Life and experiences and making it through the valley of the shadow to the other side helps us to believe. Faith is all about trust, trust built upon surviving impossible situations and finding unexpected help rise to meet you every time. We’ve had those experiences. Eventually, you begin to believe and to say thank you to the God who was there all along.

Our goal is complete faith, which is nothing more than complete trust, trust that can turn cowards into those who act courageously, trust like the story that I love of, it’s dangerous, but I love the story, trust like the little girl who stands at the landing of the stairs and jumps for her father’s arms just as she cries out, “Catch me, Daddy!” He turns to see her mid-air and quickly stretches out his arms just in time to catch her. He needs a moment to catch his breath from the shock! She just giggles freely, knowing that she could trust her dad.

We need to move toward that sort of trust in our God. We’re all on a journey of faith, and we’re all at different places. Perhaps you have some doubts with which you struggle today. Come forward in the singing of the closing hymn please and pray about them. Don’t hide them. Don’t deny them. Pray about them and pray for answers, and be open for the answers when they come. Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief. Help me have that sort of trust each day. Amen.