

Sunday, April 28, 2019 – The Second Sunday of Easter

The First Reading is from Isaiah 49:1-6

Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God."
⁵ And now the LORD says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶ he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

The Second Reading is from the Gospel of Luke 24:36-40

³⁶ While the disciples were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ Jesus said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, Jesus showed them his hands and his feet.

The Sermon is entitled, *Doubts Arise*

"Why do doubts arise in your hearts," said Jesus to his disciples. Why do doubts arise in your hearts and in mine?

According to the Gospel of Luke, Cleopas and his companion had shared that the risen Christ was made known to them in the breaking of bread at their table. Simon has an encounter with the risen Christ as well. And while the disciples were talking about these

resurrection experiences, Jesus himself stood among them again and the disciples were startled as well as terrified by his presence. So, Jesus named their terror and then asked them, “Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” The good news for us is that Jesus doesn’t scold them or reprimand them or even say to them, “Ye, of little faith.” Jesus simply asks “why” and then says, “look,” showing them his hands and feet.

I certainly can’t say that I would have acted any differently than the disciples. I don’t think any of us would have, given that Jesus often just appeared, even when the doors were locked tight. The disciples, in their startled state, imagined that they were seeing things, even something akin to a ghost. They were startled, terrified and filled with plenty of doubts as to the reality of what they were experiencing. What doubts would you have in this situation, that is, if Jesus all of sudden was standing physically present among us?

What doubts surface for you as a person of faith given the reality of the world that wakes us up each morning? Is God still good... given that people came to worship God and ended up dying in explosions of hate on Easter morning? Is God really in control... given that countless lives have been lost through raging fires, overwhelming floods, destructive earthquakes, devastating tornados, massive tsunamis and more? If God is sovereign... then why do genocides continue to occur and innocent children continue to be trafficked for gain? Awful and horrible tragedies continue to happen, so is it any wonder that doubts continue to rise in our hearts and minds? Yet, are we willing to voice these doubts that rise within us? Are we willing to explore them? Or would we rather just ignore them or bury them, hoping that they just evaporate?

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian preacher and theologian, has written over thirty books and I happen to have a number of his books on my shelves. I quote today from one of his books, which is entitled, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. I share with you his thoughts from the opening paragraph of his entry entitled *DOUBT*. He writes, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Or for another take on doubt Paul Tillich, a German-American Christian existentialist philosopher and Lutheran Protestant theologian wrote, “Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”

Which description of doubt do you prefer? An element of faith or ants in the pants of faith? Tillich’s definition seems a bit more Presbyterian, that is, it seems to be decent and in order given that there isn’t a lot of squirming and wiggling going on, as there would be with ants in the pants. Personally, I prefer Buechner’s definition of doubt as ants in the pants of faith because I believe that squirming and wiggling happens when we wrestle with our doubts. Doubts cause squirming and wiggling, which signals that our faith is alive and awake, moving and growing. When we are brave enough to wrestle with our doubts our faith can come alive in new ways.

This past Wednesday in my weekly devotional I shared about an Easter when I struggled to write a sermon to deliver on Easter Morn. Doubts arose within me and I wondered how I could preach with any integrity that death did not have the final word. It was the first Easter after my dad’s death and the overwhelming reality of grief was all too real, for both my parents were now dead. Yet, I didn’t bury my doubts, deny them or run from them. No, I wrestled them. Early on Saturday morning I went to my parents’ gravesides and tended to them. I placed

flowers and spent time talking to them and then I spent time wrestling with God. In my wrestling, I also listened for God's still small voice. And as I listened, a wave of assurance washed over me. Death was not the final word. Through my streaming tears, I sensed the power of resurrection at work in my life. I saw with greater clarity how new beginnings and possibilities had been birthed again and again through the letting go, dying and death that had taken place in my own life's journey. I agree wholeheartedly with Tillich that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is essential for faith. Doubt is essential for faith that has any depth or ability to weather life's storms.

Now Buechner continues his entry about *DOUBT* writing, "There are two principal kinds of doubt, one of the head, and the other of the stomach." He continues, "In my head there is almost nothing I can't doubt when the fit is upon me – the divinity of Christ, the efficacy of the sacraments, the significance of the Church, the existence of God. But even when I am at my most skeptical, I go with my life as though nothing untoward has happened."

Since doubting is just part of faith for Buechner, I thought I would share from another book that he has written specifically for doubter's. The book is entitled, "*Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*." He begins his introduction with faith though, not doubt. He describes faith this way, "I think of faith as a kind of whistling in the dark because, in much the same way, it helps to give us courage to hold the shadows at bay. To whistle in the dark isn't to pretend that the dark doesn't sometimes scare the living daylight out of us. Instead, I think, it's to demonstrate, if only to ourselves, that not even the dark can quite overcome our trust in the ultimate triumph of the Living Light."

"I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth," says the psalmist. Or as the Gospel of John reminds us in the opening prologue, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Doubt is part of the ebb and flow of faith between light and darkness, darkness and light, as we cling to the Living Light, the light to all nations, the light that is not overcome by darkness.

But then Buechner confesses this about the other form of doubt he describes: "I have never experienced stomach doubt, but I think Jesus did. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!" I don't think Jesus was raising a theological issue any more than he was quoting the Twenty-second Psalm. I think Jesus had looked into the abyss itself and found there a darkness that spiritually, viscerally, totally engulfed him. I think God allows that kind of darkness to happen only to his saints. The rest of us aren't up to doubting that way-or maybe believing that way either."

The abyss of stomach doubt is like being deep in a cave with no source of light. With eyes wide open all one sees is blackness. Have you ever had a "lights out" experience of total darkness like this? When you put your hand on your nose and your eyes can see absolutely nothing? I had this experience in a lava tube on the Big Island and it was completely disorienting. All four of us present in the lava tube took a guess at which way was out while the lights were out and none of us pointed in the right direction. It was easy to see how one could easily get lost cave spelunking.

This abyss of darkness that engulfed Jesus on the cross was named by St. John of the Cross as the dark night. Yet, something was made possible according to St. John in this dark night, for the darkness was a place where the mystical union of the unknowable God was made

possible. That is why Barbara Brown Taylor, an American Episcopal priest, professor, author and theologian, suggests we should learn to walk in the dark.

She suggests that none of us ever journeys through life only in the bright light of the day, as if the sun was always fully present. She realized at a point in her faith journey that her faith could be described more like the cycles of the moon, with her faith some days as sure as a brightly beaming full moon, while on other days her faith was barely like a sliver moon. Throughout her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, she chronicles lessons she learned that seemed only possible to her in the abyss of darkness.

The problem with this mode of learning, walking in the dark, is that many of us were taught to fear the dark. How many remember a time when you thought monsters were under your bed or in our closet. Most of us were probably called inside as the sun began to set, for we were conditioned to believe that darkness was the time when bad and mysterious things might happen. So, when the abyss of darkness, the stomach doubt according to Buechner, threatens to engulf us we naturally want to flip on the lights in order to keep the darkness at bay.

But can we really keep darkness at bay? The darkness of uncertainty. The darkness of having to let go of ages and stages of life. The darkness of some of our emotions. The darkness of dying to self-sufficiency and the finality of physical death. I don't think so, so maybe we should help each other learn to walk in the dark. Maybe we should be willing to share our doubts, granting each other a safe place in which we can wrestle with our doubts. Were not the disciples together trying to make sense of their experiences of death as well as the risen Christ?

Faith, my friends, is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," says the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:1). [Yet,] "faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all," says Buechner or like the phases of the moon says Taylor. This truth is why doubt is essential, for faith is not a destination, but a life long journey.

Barbara Brown Taylor concurs with Frederick Buechner and St. John saying, "Here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day." With this assurance, let us not be afraid of either head or stomach doubt, for both are essential for faith.

Barbara Brown Taylor confessed, "The best thing I can say is that learning to walk in the dark has allowed me to take back my faith." May the darkness help us take back the mystery of the one whom we call God as we journey together with each other through the adventure called life. Amen.