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Sermon 4-19-09 “Doubters Welcome.”

A friend of mine writes me about an actual conversation overheard at church on Palm Sunday two weeks ago. Person A says, “I won’t be here next Sunday. How about you?” To which person B responds, “Oh, no! I never attend with the two-times-a-year people!”

Well, what do you think about that? My guess is that most of you here today were here last Sunday, and are hardly that casual about your reasons for coming to church, Easter or not. I’m glad to see you this Sunday, whatever you think your motivations are about church attendance.

Of course, regardless of any other talents I may have, mind-reading is not one of my gifts or talents—maybe that’s a good thing. But I should let you know that when I’m thinking and praying about a sermon for many days beforehand, and whenever I write about, there is an inevitable challenging image in my mind of you in the congregation, having read or listened especially to the Gospel passage for the day, listening attentively and thinking, “Eureka—that rings a bell for me,” or maybe something like, “Yes—but?” I’m always reviewing in my mind whether what I say from this pulpit makes helpful sense to you, or—to put it the way a lawyer did once about a case, “does it pass the smell test?” When anyone is kind enough to say something good about my sermons, I often either think or say, “I preach to myself” because I too have the same questions you do.

Those questions come especially to mind this morning, the Sunday after Easter, when we hear the Gospel read every year on this second Sunday of Easter. If the images in my mind about you as a listener are on the mark, then the Eastertide Gospel this morning should help you to come straight out with your doubts, your

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questions, or any confusion you have about where you're headed in your life.

It's not just people like me, from Missouri—the “show-me” state that should resonate with the reaction of the disciple Thomas in the passage this morning. He had heard, second hand as we have heard, about the reaction of those despondent, uncertain disciples of Jesus who had gathered fearfully in an upper room, and had experienced the risen Lord breaking all the physical barriers and coming into their midst saying to them in their hopelessness and fear, “Peace, I will give you a new spirit.” But Thomas, catching up with the others in the same room a week after that, comes into the room challenging and questioning, as he had done several other times in Jesus’ ministry, saying “unless I see and touch the marks and nails in his body too, I will not believe.” His first reaction was to think he had to grasp him, to hold onto him.

I think all of us would like to have that certainty, not just about the Easter story itself, but about the lives that we lead, but that's not the way things are happening. “Uncertainty” has become almost a cliché in our vocabulary. In light of the historic turbulence not just in the stock market but in every layer and side of life for untold millions of people around the world, that we live in an age of uncertainty, an uncertainty that few are prepared for. You and I both know of several families ~~we know~~, in this parish and in your acquaintance, whose lives have been turned upside down in the midst of all this financial turbulence.

Is it any wonder that we can say or think more strongly “where is God in all this?” Is it any wonder that we have doubts? Is it any wonder when we can have doubts, spoken and unspoken, when we read the story in Time magazine this week that features the story of a bright beautiful 4-year-old dying in his sleep, the victim of the kind of epidemic seizure that another's young daughter has suffered daily for 11 years.

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All of us know intimately other examples of life-changing crises in our lives—the death of a loved one, a disaster of nature, a change or a loss of a job by someone in your family, your faith too has been tested. Your first reaction may be to withdraw some way from other people or the everyday life that's been comfortable before, frozen somewhat by fear of the unknown and anxiety about the future, and maybe a little cynical, wondering if the light at the end of the tunnel is perhaps just another train.

So where do we go with this? Queen Victoria's prime minister was asked by the Queen's new and very young chaplain at Windsor Palace, "What shall I preach about? And the Prime Minister responded, "Her majesty would be very pleased if you preached no longer than "about" fifteen minutes.

Heeding that good advice let me conclude with a few pointers in the direction we should not go, and where we can helpfully go as we respond to the doubts that, if we are not trying to rationalize or deny the doubts that come to us, all of us have.

I believe that we will continue to be led down by dark and dead-end alleys if we are like the draconian, staunchly traditional school principal portrayed by Meryl Streep in the movie "Doubt", whose life and career were founded on the rocks of old certitudes, who is presented by a tautly suspenseful conflict of wills between the affable Catholic school priest who champions progressive thought and compassion for wrongdoing. I wish I had time to summarize the movie. It turns out that old dictums and practices of Sister Aloysius' training will not in the long run give her the certainty she expected and fought for. Nor will they for us in this changing world. As reviewers write, The movie "Doubt" isn't about certainty, but ambiguity, that no man's land between right and wrong, black and white." "Doubt" is a cautionary tale about the dangers of being sure."



The writer of the original play “Doubt-A Parable” concludes that there is, in fact, no “last word” no right answer. And because the writing is so good, and the actors Meryl Streep and Philip Hoffman are so good, people are left “squirming with discomfort” at the end of the film.

Now I happened to see the movie on a long flight to England last month and I know what they mean by that. But after returning home on the eve of Holy Week and Good Friday it became more clear to me how all of us can deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty about moral choices, and about death itself, that faced Thomas after Jesus’ death, and that confront you and me, now.



We are not left “squirming with discomfort” if we reflect on the events of Palm Sunday and Easter Day. The Gospel writer, John, ends the passage we read today by saying that all this was written as signs of what God is continuing to do, to describe how the Jesus who had known pain and suffering, loneliness and loss, who had wept as we have wept, meets us in our life-changes and our earth=changes. God is not absent from all of this—he suffers with us! That was the astonishing revelation to Thomas. When he came face to face with Jesus’ displaying his wounds, he knew that he could only say, “My Lord and My God.”

The letter-writer John says later from that experience of the suffering God in our midst, “Perfect love casts out fear.” Whatever will come our way we can begin to let go of our fight for temporary controls over death and begin to face the future creatively and courageously. We can begin to understand that at the heart of life is a Cross, that life is cruciform, the best and the worst, the triumphant and the tragic are folded in together in what God is doing in the world.

I’ve been spending decades trying to internalize that understanding of a God who suffers with us, and I’ll tell you, it’s better than just “squirming with discomfort” as we get rid of old certainties and face the ambiguities of a changing world. For now I know that Palm Sunday and the Cross, and the astonished disciples at the empty tomb on Easter whose lives are changed from that experience—is not about the past at all, but about your future and the world’s future. I for one am willing to bet my life on that promise! AMEN