

April 10, 2005
John 20:19-29
First Parish Church
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Untamed Mysteries

A letter to God from an 11 year old:

Dear God,

I know that you are made of all kinds of people. When I suggested this in religious school my teacher told me I was wrong. You should be more careful about who you hire to teach your stuff.

*Yours truly,
Marci*

(Talking to Your Child About God, pg. 95)

Thank God, God had breathed enough life and spirit into Marci that she didn't just believe the teacher. She doubted. As Marci says she knows that God is made of all kinds of people.

Stories like Marci's strike terror into this pastor's heart. With great sympathy for the teacher, (who may not have even believed what s/he was saying, but was giving what s/he thought was the 'Sunday school answer') the teacher missed a wonderful opportunity to engage Marci on her spiritual journey. How did Marci know? What kinds of people?

How quickly too many children learn to give the "church answer!" Once when a 7-year-old child commented to me how incredible it was that Jesus made it possible for a blind man to see again, I responded, "That's an amazing story. What do you think about it?" She said, "I have to believe it happened that way because I go to church." My heart

dropped. You see this child was my own daughter, Lauren. I said gently, "No you don't. You can wonder about what happened." She seemed surprised and relieved.

Where did we get the idea that doubting is antithetical to faith? I got that impression for my childhood pastor, who basically said to me that if I had enough faith I would stop asking so many questions. Yet, my questions didn't go away. Over the years, I've come to experience the very questions themselves as a gift from God. As the song Tim sang for us says, "It takes a lot of doubting for our faith to grow." The songwriter, Linnea Good, says, "believing may be easy, but faith is slow." She seems to be using the word belief to talk about what we think with our minds and the word faith to refer to how we live with our whole selves – body, mind and spirit.

Theologian Paul Tillich once wrote, "Serious doubt is a confirmation of faith." (*Dynamics of Faith*, pg. 22) Such doubt implies that the topic at hand is important enough to be struggled with. We don't have to "precipitate to an answer." For example, where would we be if people had not had serious doubts about the passages in scripture that seem to support slavery? Jesus himself questioned, doubted, and challenged many of the religious beliefs and practices of his own community.

One of my concerns about the church is that we have developed this perception that the church is the place you go when you know clearly what you believe, instead of being the place where we engage one another with the things we know (like Marci) **and** the things about which we have doubts. If the church is not a place where people can bring their spiritual doubts and questions, you can be sure that many will not come.

Without serious doubts and questions, the church itself runs the danger of stagnating. With a touch of humor, Frederick Beuchner (in *Wishful Thinking*), put it this way, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving." Well, Thomas had ants in his pants. In spite of what his friends told him, he couldn't dismiss his own questions and doubts. He's an "I want to see it with my own two eyes" kind of person.

During the children's moment when Susan asked if you would believe her that there was a cow in her pet carrier, I suspect some of you believed her and some of you probably guessed that she had a representative of a cow. Still, seeing is believing. It satisfies our curiosity to see what's really there.

But, is seeing enough? Our eyes can deceive us. Police officers and lawyers know that people who "see" the same event tell different stories about what happened. Magicians count on our eyes being deceived. They know how to fool our eyes and make us believe in something we see, even though we know it is not real.

Those who make videos and movies count on deceiving us, as well. For a long time, people used photographs as

proof that something happened. However, now with digital photography we know you can't trust pictures. They can be altered in any way the presenter wants. Many crowds that we now see in movies or commercials are computer generated. The computer artists even go so far as to generate imperfections in the scene to fool our eyes, because we sense if it is too perfect. So they fool us with imperfection.

Is seeing enough? Even though the story says Jesus offers to have Thomas touch him, it doesn't say that he actually does. Pondering about this, a Christian writer, Heather Murray Elkins, wrote a poem called, "The Younger Brother of Thomas." For this fictional younger brother seeing is not enough.

*Thomas didn't really touch him.
I would have.
What can you prove just by looking?
Since when is seeing believing?
They killed my brother's friend.
That's fact.
And Thomas just went crazy.
I was there.
It hurt to heart him cry like that.
I don't want to go crazy like Thomas has.
And then this story starts:
That Jesus isn't dead,
That he's been seen
Walking through walls,
Showing up at supper time.
But nobody, nobody had touched him.
Thomas didn't buy it.
I wouldn't have either.
Never listen to an eyewitness.
Get the facts firsthand.
Don't settle for someone
You can't get a hold of.
But then this ghost or hoax appeared
and called his name.
Thomas took one look
and thought he'd seen God.*

*He really didn't touch him, see.
But doubting Thomas believes.
It would take more than that to convince me.
Doubting runs in the family.
(Imaging the Word, v.2, pg. 188)*

Thomas and Thomas' fictional younger brother would have company among us. They also had company among the people of their day. At the end of the gospel of Matthew it says the eleven disciples go to Galilee to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. *When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.* They saw; but some doubted. Even those who were first hand witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus had a hard time getting their minds and hearts around what happened. They saw, they believed, they worshiped, and they doubted.

The gospel writer, whom we know as John, obviously didn't have any doubt that questions and doubting would be part of the faith journey for all the generations to come. Therefore it is not surprising that he ends this story with the words, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

It is true, in some respects, that seeing is believing. Yet, in other ways it is true that believing is seeing. You may have heard of the studies done with teachers, who are given a group of unremarkable students. The teacher is told that the students have been tested and they have great potential. Because the teacher believes in the students' capabilities, the teacher and the students see their way to accomplish remarkable things.

On the journey of faith, believing and seeing intertwine to give us the eyes to

see with the heart and the soul, as well as, with the body and the mind.

One last thing – something caught my attention this time in the story of Thomas. I'm struck by what happened between the two appearances of Jesus. Even after the other disciples witness to what they have experienced and Thomas expresses his doubts, they don't part company with one another. The other disciples don't say to Thomas, "you have to believe this or you can't be a part of our fellowship." And Thomas doesn't walk out on them, just because they have had a spiritual experience that he hasn't had. When Jesus comes to them again, they are all gathered together. With their beliefs and their doubts, with the untamed mysteries swirling around them and within them, they are still together as a community of faith.