

## When Faith Grows Cold

John 20: 24-29

February 17, 2008

The Christian community has observed the forty days before Easter as a special time of fasting and repentance since the fourth century. Since the Easter season occurred during the spring season, the name Lent was tagged to this church observance. The word Lent is derived from Old English denoting the spring season of the year.

The Lenten Season invites us to reflect on the great mysteries of faith. As we draw near to Passion Week and our Lord's crucifixion, our thoughts naturally turn a little bit more somber. The cross casts a huge shadow over Lenten Season. Consequently, while the life of faith is a wonderful adventure, it can also be a life of deep soul searching. Last week, for instance, we studied the apostle Peter, and learned that the call to follow Jesus may result in an inconvenient way to live one's life.

Today, we are going to look at the life of Thomas, another one of the Lord's twelve apostles. Thomas was a fiery disciple of our Lord. In John 11 he swore allegiance to Jesus even at the cost of his own life. In John 14 Thomas confesses his ignorance of spiritual matters, indicating his teachable spirit. To the bone Thomas is an authentic disciple. He is most often known as "Doubting Thomas," because he would not believe in the reality of the resurrection until he saw the nail marks in the risen Lord's body.

Sometimes churches have a hard time making a place for those who doubt and are unsure of their faith. Through the years I have known many such people who dropped out of church because the church turned a deaf ear to their questions of doubt and uncertainty. One woman told me, "My heart feels as cold as ice when it comes to God. Why should I be a hypocrite and keep coming to church? Besides, no one wants me at church. There is no place for a doubter like me."

My first inclination was to argue with her and try to say something wise and clever that would move her away from her doubt and back to God. But I have learned that arguments seldom if ever move anyone back to God. Arguments usually just make people more resolute in their decision to back away from faith.

Jesus didn't argue with people about their faith. He simply accepted people where they were in their faith journey. Tax-collectors, prostitutes, beggars and all kinds of riffraff were embraced by Jesus. Jesus didn't argue with those who were away from God; he had compassion for them and loved them as only Jesus could.

Phillip Yancey writes an insightful story about his college roommate, Reiner, who went to work at a summer camp for people who were physically handicapped. Among Reiner's responsibilities he was to give the chapel address each morning to several dozen people who were strapped to wheelchairs, unable to take care of their physical needs because of severe disabilities.

Reiner preached how the gospel would help them to live victorious lives. If they would trust Jesus, they would be able to soar as the eagle and not be weary. The people in the wheelchairs looked at this young man as though he were speaking a foreign language. Reiner realized he was not connecting to these people. In fact, several of them spoke with the director of the camp and asked that Reiner not speak to them anymore. His speaking apparently depressed them. The young man was stunned. People had always responded positively to him before. His first reaction was to tell these people that they needed to repent and trust Jesus. After a night of prayer he decided to approach them a little differently.

The next day, facing a rather hostile group of disabled people, Reiner told them quite honestly he was confused. He said, "I don't know what to say to you. I feel helpless." At that point one of the ladies spoke out, "Now we understand you. Now we are paying attention to you."

The Lenten Season reminds the church that there is much we do not understand. In the darkness of such mystery, we, too, know confusion and uncertainty. We do not have all the answers. There is so much about this life of faith that we do not understand. We identify with the man in Mark 9 who said to Jesus: "I believe; help my unbelief." Thomas speaks for all of us. There are times when it is difficult for us to hang on to faith. This passage of scripture offers some wonderful insights into the nature of faith.

If you find yourself on spiritual life-support this morning, this text is for you. Perhaps, you are in the sunshine of faith. Maybe you have never walked closer to God than at the present. Listen closely. You will not always be on that spiritual mountaintop. Everyone eventually journeys down into the valley of faith. Sooner or later the story of Thomas will speak to all of us.

What can we learn from the story of Thomas?

First, this text suggests to us that **there are Seasons of Faith**. In much of the world there are four seasons; spring, summer, fall and winter. These seasons give a certain rhythm to life. Just as there are seasons in nature, the Bible makes a strong case that there are seasons in the life of faith. The men and women of faith did not stay on a spiritual high all the time. Moses, David, the psalmists, Jeremiah, the disciples, and Paul knew various seasons of faith. Sometimes they would rejoice in the Lord and at other times they found God distant and remote.

To live as a Christian during spring and summer is intoxicating. We feel so close to God. We believe that God is near to us and confident that he will never abandon us. But in the Christian life there is also the winter season. About December 21 of each year the northern hemisphere experiences the winter solstice, where the sun is at the greatest distance from the earth. This part of the world grows cold during this season of the year. Wintery faith is when God seems far away, when our lives seem spiritually cold and barren.

Thomas knew all about seasons of faith. Earlier he had promised Jesus that he would go and die with him in Jerusalem. Thomas was sure of

himself and his faith. He was in the summer of faith. His trust in God was unequivocal. No one would doubt that Thomas was a loyal follower of Jesus. But now? Now Thomas was full of doubt. He did not believe in the resurrection. He was deep in the wintery season of faith. His faith was cold, barren and emotionless. To Thomas, Jesus was dead and so was his faith.

Have you ever known a wintery faith? Has God ever seemed distant and far away? If you are a human being with flesh and blood, then the answer is a resounding “Yes.” Why is it that we go through such deep spiritual valleys? Why can’t we stay on the mountaintop all the time? First, the Bible clearly states that we are all sinners. Sin separates us from God. Isaiah writes that our sins have caused God to hide his face from us (Isa. 59). Sin is at heart a rebellious attitude that says life can be lived just fine without God. We can manage life just fine without any divine assistance, thank-you. God withdraws his presence from us because he is not an aggressive friend. He never enters where there is a “Do not enter” sign. Only those who seek him with all their hearts will find his presence near.

But there is also a second reason why God sometimes appears so far away: The very nature of faith does not give us certainty. Faith is just that, faith. Paul writes that we live by faith, not by sight. In this world, faith cannot be tied to certainty; there is only trust. Faith is all enmeshed in our humanity. Just as we are frail and fragile creatures, likewise, our faith is spoiled by our humanity. All too often our faith is too closely tied to our feelings. If we feel God, he must be near. If we don’t feel God, then he is distant. Paul writes that our spiritual sight is distorted, much like looking through a thick glass. But someday we will see God and live in his presence. In the meanwhile, we live by faith.

A third reason why we can’t stay on the mountaintop all the time is because God’s nature is one of great mystery. C.S. Lewis was fond of saying that God is a wild God and we can never begin to tame him. Isaiah writes that God is a God who hides himself (Isa. 45:15). The nature of God is elusive. As creatures we must understand that God will not be manipulated or put into a box of human understanding. God may withdraw himself from us for reasons only he knows.

Seasons of faith are inevitable. We all go through different seasons of faith and sometimes we enter into the dark and bleak season of faith called winter.

**Every Believer Passes through the Wintery Season.** Years ago when I was in college I found myself in a wintery season of faith (and I might add I have traveled down this barren path many times since). God seemed far away and what is worse, I really didn’t care. I went to a pastor in the area and he told me that I needed to get saved. Well, I told him that I had trusted Christ as my Savior and Lord and he argued that if I really were a Christian, then I would not doubt. I went away that day very confused. I had given my heart to Christ, that I was sure of, but I could make no sense of all my disconnected spiritual wires. It was as though I were totally separated from God.

Churches have not done a very good job of helping people to understand that doubt is part of faith. Actually, the word “doubt” doesn’t even occur in the verses we read concerning Thomas. The word translated “doubt” is the word “unbelief.” This is a very important distinction. In John’s writings the word “believe” is found over one hundred times (107 to be exact). Only one time is the word “believe” used as a noun. The other one hundred and six times it is used as a verb. In other words, believing is something you do. Believing is not so much a place to stand as it is a journey to travel.

When Jesus says to Thomas, “Stop unbelieving” it is clear that Jesus wants Thomas to get back to work. Unbelieving has paralyzed Thomas, made him unable to do the work of God.

Doubt is different than unbelief. Doubt may not paralyze us. We may still function and do the work of God. We may continue to feed the poor and carry out the mission of God. We just feel distance from God. Our hearts may not be in what we do. Unbelief, on the other hand, freezes us into inactivity. Jesus says, “Stop unbelieving” and get on with the work of God.

Marriage therapists counsel that when one partner in a marriage doesn’t feel loving toward the other partner, then the partner without feelings must work his way into the feelings. Do deeds of loving kindness even when you don’t feel like it. As you act out your love an amazing thing happens; your actions will lead to feelings. I believe this is something of what Jesus is telling Thomas: “Okay, Thomas, so you don’t feel like you have faith. Well, get on with living your life for me anyway. As you do the work of God, you will begin to know the presence of God within you.”

Doubt and unbelief are associated with the wintery season of faith. We often still cling to the faith that is within us, although it be by the most slender of threads.

The people who wrote the Psalms were men who often lived with doubt. They complained to God and at times shook their fists at him. In fact, the Psalms contain more words about doubt by far than they do words of praise and adoration. It is not even close. Not just the Psalms tell us about people who have journeyed through the wintery season of faith. Jeremiah knew what it was like to not know God’s presence. Job is the classic person of faith who went through an incredibly difficult wintery season. Moses, David and a host of other biblical writers passed through the wintery season of faith.

A century ago the great Christian writer, Hannah Whitall Smith, who wrote *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*, confessed that much of her life had been spent in the wintery season of faith. Recently, students of Mother Teresa have learned that she also went through times of doubt and despair. She writes of her “dark night of the soul” as an unbearable distance from God.

All of us at one time or another pass through the wintery season of faith. Although Thomas has been tagged with the label “Doubting Thomas,” all the disciples struggled with belief in the resurrection. A few verses earlier Mary Magdalene told the disciples that she had seen

the Lord and yet when the disciples met, they met behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jews. Why were they afraid? Is it not because they had not believed themselves? Only when they saw the Lord did they rejoice (20:19-20).

What do you do when you find yourself in the season of wintery faith? **Find a Shelter in a Warm Place.** The disciples are gathered together a week after the resurrection. Verse 26 offers incredible insight for the church. The ones who believed in the resurrection of Jesus were together. The Bible clearly states that “Thomas was with them.” Wow! Thomas, who doesn’t even believe in the most important doctrine of the Christian faith, the resurrection, has been invited by the other disciples to stay with them.

Why were the disciples so inclusive of one who didn’t believe in the resurrection? It is because they had all been doubters themselves. A week earlier when Mary Magdalene had announced to the disciples that she had seen Jesus, the other disciples were skeptical to say the least. That night they met together behind closed doors. Why were the doors closed? It is because they did not believe in the resurrection and consequently were fearful of the Jews. They, too, had to see Jesus to believe.

Every person in this room has known doubt. We have all known times when our faith was shaky or sometimes even non-existent. Thank God there were people around us who cared about us, invited us to share our thoughts and doubts, and who prayed for us when we could not pray ourselves.

In a community of compassionate believers who do not condemn us but rather love us, we day by day move closer to God. One day, maybe when we least expect it, God’s presence is near to us once again. Like Thomas we can sing, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus said that he was a physician who came to care for and heal the sick. Should not our job as Christians be similar? Should we not invite those who are far from God to come and experience our love and hospitality? The church offers the most conducive place in the world for people who are struggling with their faith. One of the missions of the church is to be a kind of spiritual ICU for those on life-support.

A man went to a rabbi after his wife had died and said, “I hate God. He let my wife die. I have no place for him in my heart.” The rabbi told the man to go to the temple and shout and yell at God as long as he felt anger in his heart. The man went to the temple and shouted and yelled at God. For hours the man angrily denounced God as a great deceiver and fraud. He even cursed God. After many hours the man ceased his shouting and screaming and became quiet. For several hours he stood in the temple with friends and loved ones all around him. You see, all through the man’s pain, while he had been shouting and screaming at God, they had been praying for him, giving him water, helping him in every way they could. The man began to cry; then he started weeping uncontrollably. Tears like a torrent flowed down his cheeks. “Oh, my dear God,” he prayed. And all the people said, “Amen.” In the season of wintery faith, one needs a warm shelter. Amen.