

SERMON CCI John 20: 24-31 MOTHERS DAY 2019

While I was in Yakima last weekend for the Women's Conference, I was sad to learn that one of my favorite Christian authors died. Rachel Held Evans was a young wife, mother, Christian writer and speaker who enlarged thought and faith for many people. She died last Saturday at the very young age of 37, from an infection only two weeks after becoming ill. Since today's scripture reading tells the story of Thomas and his doubts, I was happy to discover Rachel had written about her own doubts. Here's some of what she wrote:

When people say, "Why can't you just have more faith," I say, "Because I've seen the rabbit."

SLIDE You've probably seen the famous optical illusion of the duck and rabbit. Well, let's say the duck represents a faith-view of the world, and the rabbit represents a chance-view. **For most of my life, I could only see the duck.** I interpreted everything that happened around me and within me as acts of God. He was the only explanation for how the world came to be, how people managed to be good to one another, how believers had religious experiences, how things always worked together for good, how the Bible spoke to me, how the day after I prayed for this or that, I just happened to receive this or that.

I looked at the pattern and saw only the duck. How anyone saw anything else was beyond me. It was a duck- plain and simple.

SLIDE **Then one day I saw the rabbit.** I could see another pattern that explained the world: chance, wishful thinking, self-delusion, self-centeredness, superstition, fear, projection, science, psychology, coincidence, power plays, politics.

SLIDE It's not that I stopped seeing the duck. It's just that once I saw the rabbit, the picture made sense both ways.

John's gospel is the only gospel that tells the story of Thomas and his doubts. Even though all the disciples doubted Jesus had risen from the dead at first, only poor Thomas has gone down in history as Doubting Thomas. Who would want to live with that the rest of your life? You express your doubt one time... and it's the only thing people remember. Many sermons have been preached about how not to be a doubting Thomas. But really, Thomas was just the one disciple willing to admit outloud that he'd seen the rabbit.

In today's scripture reading we find Jesus' disciples together again one week after Jesus had appeared among them as they met on Easter evening. Today we

learn that Thomas wasn't there the first time. So where was Thomas on Easter evening?

John's gospel paints a picture of Thomas as a pragmatist. He didn't wear rose-colored glasses as though everything would be OK just because Jesus was around. Thomas was no fool. In John 11 when Jesus told his disciples he was heading back to Jerusalem, Thomas knew that if Jesus went back to Jerusalem, he would be going to his death. His response? "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16). In John 14 when Jesus told his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you.... You know the way to the place where I am going," it was Thomas, the pragmatist, who blurted out, "Lord, we don't know where you are going; so how can we know the way?" (14:5). Thomas was a give-me-the-facts kind of guy, and when he had the facts, he was a now-let's-face-the-facts kind of guy.

So Thomas knew Jesus had died; it wasn't a fake death so his disciples could hide the body and claim he rose from the dead. It wasn't a metaphor about the natural ebb and flow of life and the seasons. He had been there, he may even have helped take Jesus' lifeless body down from the cross, carry it across town, and place it in the tomb. Facts were facts. Everything Thomas had believed about Jesus as the Messiah had died on that cross, every hope of a better life, every dream of God's kingdom come was gone. It should not surprise us that Thomas was not there that first Sunday evening; he was devastated.

We know what Thomas said when he heard that people had seen Jesus alive. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Thomas had the courage to say what every other disciple had thought when they first heard the women say they had seen Jesus at the tomb that morning. They doubted the women's story, and Thomas doubted theirs.

Doubts are scary things though. To believe something as life-changing as that Jesus is the Son of God sent to earth to link us to God Himself, to stake our whole life on that belief. And then to wonder whether it is true is scary. What does it mean if I doubt? Doubts aren't always about whether God exists. Life can bring those painful moments that make us cry out, "Why?" Why did my friend die, or my child, or my spouse? What kind of God lets some people suffer so much while others get off easy? Why? Sometimes we believe so strongly in an answer to prayer that when what we prayed for doesn't happen, maybe even the opposite happens, we doubt whether God cares, or maybe he just doesn't have the power

after all. How do I keep believing in the duck when there are other reasonable explanations?

Is this what happened to Thomas? For three years traveling and ministering with Jesus, Thomas learned to see the world Jesus' way. Learned to see the duck front and center. That blessed are the poor not the rich, those who grieve, not the happy, those who thirst for righteousness because God will provide what they really need. Began to see how the first shall be last and the last first. That serving is the way to the kind of power God honors, not lording it over people. He saw Jesus have power over the natural world as he healed the sick and calmed stormy seas, walked on water, fed crowds with a small boy's lunch, he even raised Lazarus from the dead. Everywhere Jesus and the disciples went, they saw more of God's action, saw more of the duck.

But then they watched the duck die. Where was God in that? And Thomas, being a pragmatist, maybe even more than the others, saw the rabbit. Maybe it was all just false hope they had put in a man like themselves, a man who was killed for being too radical. Not a Savior.

Praise God, Thomas said outloud the doubts we so often hide. When he heard the witness of the other disciples this time, he chose to put himself in the place where he could see and hear for himself. He was open about his doubts, and open to seeing. "Not until I **see** his hands and place **my hand** in his side." It's one thing to say, "I don't know anymore," and quit searching, and another to go see.

How gently Jesus treated Thomas with his doubts. Thomas didn't even have to worry about how to say what he was thinking. Jesus just invited him, "Thomas, come closer, see my wounds, touch them with your hands, and believe." There was no condemnation, no accusations, no "Why can't you just have more faith?" Instead he said, "Come near and see." I love how Jesus is not offended with our honest doubts, our honest questions. Jesus knows all about the rabbit, he knows about the other ways to look at life besides faith. And often they are at play in what happens. Science does create medications and treatments that heal quite effectively whether you believe in God or not. If you throw the dice over and over, by chance you will probably eventually roll a lucky 7; you don't need prayer for that to happen. But faith and prayer were never about improving the odds of getting what we want; they are all about learning to trust the One who created us, and choosing to live his ways no matter how the dice roll turns out. So Jesus tells Thomas and us, "Now that you've seen, stop wavering and choose. Believe."

Often our doubts come because what we've believed since childhood doesn't fit the situations we face as an adult. For example, we learn as children that God has the power to do anything. God shut the lions' mouths to protect Daniel in the lions den; God helped the young boy David with a few stones in his sling shot beat the giant Goliath with his huge sword and armor. If we haven't learned along the way that although God has the power, he doesn't always rescue us or protect us. Or that we learn more about faith in the difficult times in life than we ever do when we're rescued, then when the rescue doesn't happen, our faith is rocked by doubts about God's power or his love. Our simple childhood image of God is often too small for the complexity of life we face as adults. We've seen the rabbit and we doubt.

But our doubts don't scare Jesus because he knows that doubt can be the pathway to a deeper and wider faith. Sometimes we have to let go of a childlike faith to grab hold of a mature faith. If we come near to God rather than hide and act like everything is OK, we can connect with a more God-sized duck and find our faith renewed. It was true for Thomas, and it can be true for us. Then we can join him in declaring, "My Lord, and my God." The strongest declaration of faith in all 4 gospels was made by Doubting Thomas.

It's Mother's Day, and one of the deepest concerns of Christian mothers is whether our children still believe when they become adults. We teach our kids the Bible stories, how to live the way Jesus taught us to live, how to pray. We are so happy when they give their lives to Christ and are baptized. What do we do later when they question whether they believe anymore? What do we do when they begin to see the rabbit?

Jesus is our model for handling doubts. No sermons, no accusations. He invited Thomas to bring his doubts and come and see, put his hands in Jesus' side, dare to touch the wounds in his hands, dare to face his doubts. So we too invite our kids into a conversation about their doubts, what's troubling them, why it's hard to believe. Maybe they've had a life-changing disappointment and wonder where God is, wonder why. If you're willing, share a time when you had doubts. We all do. Look at one of the people in God's Word who doubted and invite God to lead the way through the doubt. It's scary, but doubt really can be the path to a deeper and wider, more mature faith that sees the rabbit, but chooses to live by the duck, chooses to live by faith.