

4-23-17 “Ants in the Pants of Faith” A Reflection on John 20:19-31 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

The older I get the more appreciation I harbor for doubt...mind you, not that I exactly enjoy walking around with from day to day with whatever doubt I happen to have before me on a particular day. But doubt does have its place. It plays a vital role. I mean where would we be without doubt?

I'll tell you were: we'd be living in a hellish sort of a place, a self-fulfilling prophecy sort of universe, where anything you fix your mind on becomes unquestioning reality, which may at first, on the surface sound appealing. But not so fast. Please realize that as a resident of such a universe we'd all be in for the ride of our life. Meaning, the second your fixed and unquestioning reality bumped up against my fixed unquestioning reality, look out, stand back, because all ambiguity and wiggle room would be removed from the equation. Simply, if your fixed, unquestioning reality didn't exactly match my fixed, unquestioning reality—and of course there is not a snowball's chance in you know where of that happening--it's bombs bursting in air time.

For all I know a fixed unquestioning reality is exactly what a black hole is—an unimaginable high pressure place from which no one can escape. So no, give me my doubt, please give everybody doubt!

Doubt, all full of light and life and real world frustrations which perpetually provoke and challenge us and raise ever new and relevant issues. That's my prayer and blessedly God being no fool, God provides us with the gift of doubt. As someone wrote, “When the possibility of doubt is gone, the possibility of faith is gone.” And God is all about us being full of faith. And likewise, this is why I begin each worship hour saying, “...if you are doubting or believing or a little bit of each, you are welcome here...” Because I too am all about us being full of faith. Which places God and I and each of you on the same page—what are the chances?

As best-selling American 20th century author Madeleine L'Engle insightfully responded when asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubt?” Her response was, “I believe in God with all my doubt.” Amen to that! Doubt is 101% necessary to faith; because faith, as I'm sure we can all relate to, is well, a loose-goosey, malleable, come and go, intensity-varying sort of thing. Whereas, absolute fixed, unquestioning convictions of the sort that exist where doubt doesn't exist, will have none of that sloppy wiggle-room nonsense.

Until reflecting on all this this time around, I confess I'm not sure I've ever thought of doubt as a virtue before. But I do now. A virtue is a good thing, a moral, righteous, honorable thing that lifts and enriches life, in yes exactly the same way a life full of sloppy, wiggle-room-type-faith accomplishes. This is one thing we in progressive churches have nailed. If we have anything nailed, we have this nailed. Without any doubt, we do sloppy, wiggle-room-type faith exceedingly well (granted, sometimes too well...but we'll leave that for another sermon). All the same, faith with doubt in it is what we celebrate in this place. And the reason, as someone once said of doubt, is because “Doubt is like ants in the pants of faith.”

And I love that because I can't imagine a more successful image of the role doubt plays in our faith lives. Like ants in the pants, such faith is well, anything but sedentary and stationary—or so I imagine, as I confess I'm not sure that literally speaking ants in the pants is an experience I've ever had. But regarding faith, O-M-G, in spades.

All of which brings us around to Thomas and the other disciples, female and male, young and old. As you know, what they all have in common is that they weren't there for the Resurrection (most of them weren't there for the Crucifixion either, but again, we'll leave that for another sermon). So, having missed that rather hugely significant event early Easter morning, one and all are playing catch-up; and as anyone who has ever played catch-up knows, questions abound. And, likewise, regarding any and all faith issues, where questions abound, so does doubt—which we now fully realize is a really good thing.

I mean, just look at the priceless Thomas narrative and the invaluable dialogue that flooded the world and our lives as a result of the ants in Thomas' pants...ants, which compelled him to stay engaged with his faith community when they had experienced the Risen Christ without him, cuz he wasn't in church that **Sunday**; ants yes, which compelled him to ask questions and ponder earth-shaking issues—remember, “there's a whole lot of shakin goin' on.” It was Thomas' ants shakin in his pants that finally compelled Thomas to profess the singular most powerful and concise confession of faith recorded in our Gospels, “My Lord and my God!” Now if that's what ants in the pants produces, all I can say is, “Dear Lord give me some of those ants!” As any theorist, author or even scientist realizes, sometimes the best way to illustrate something—in this case faith—is to show the absence of it...namely, Thomas' amazing shakin ants.

So we have Thomas standing there with ants in his pants confessing the greatest confession ever, and yes, we're rightfully impressed by that. I mean, who does that? But actually there is something infinitely more significant going on here, and you may have missed it. It's this: Jesus breathed on Thomas and all the disciples the Holy Spirit. Yes, precisely like God breathed life on all creation way back when before time was recorded, before creation was fully created, here it's New Life time.

Unlike Luke's unforgettable dancing tongues of fire, John's Pentecost is more subdued. I happen to believe this is because John understands the gift of the Holy Spirit is linked to that rather huge event we celebrated last week and is yet playing out in our lesson and our lives, the Easter miracle. For John Pentecost—receiving the breath of God—is part and parcel, and forever and ever linked to Resurrection. Think about it. You can't have one without the other, can you? There is no new life without new life—no God with us, no new life with God if God is not raised. Period. Kinda obvious, so John doesn't make all that big an issue of it. He just sort of in passing describes the Resurrected One breathing...as if it is natural, as if being Risen and having a life with God is something we too inhale and exhale.

Now as amazing and mind-boggling and earth-shaking as all this is, I find one more little detail here equally impressive. Jesus breathed on them the Holy breath of God *before* in any way, shape or form, addressing either Thomas' doubts and questions or anybody else's, when obviously both would have been rather prevalent among countless people. I mean, we're talking nothing less than Resurrection here. Of course there are doubts, question, no shortage of them. In other words, Jesus ignores the elephant in the room. Jesus acts freely despite an abundance of doubt and questions. I love that! This means the gift of the Holy Spirit is a blanket gift to one and all quite regardless of everything else. God's greatest gift of God-with-us is in no way conditional; it's unconditional. It doesn't matter what questions we bring, what ants we might have dancing in our pants, what faith informs or doesn't inform. It doesn't matter if we can recite all 66 books of the Bible, or if we have the 23 Psalms memorized. It doesn't matter if we know the names of the 12 disciples in alphabetical order or the doctrinal principles of both of our two denominations. Even our failing miserably to love our neighbor as our self doesn't hinder our

Jesus' unmerited gift. For Jesus all of that is irreverent to whether or not he's going to breathe on us his empowering Spirit. He simply exhales abundant and eternal life without a single string attached to it. I love that! That's huge.

Simply, what Jesus is focused on is life, abundant, full, glorious life, life as he lived, life as God wills it, life selfless and generous and forgiving and merciful—all that and more. Jesus knows the imperfections of our hearts, the flaws in our character, the utter shameful junk we harbor much too much and for much too long, and he just throws it all out the window because he is all about moving forward from Good Friday tragedies; He's all about creating new and better days, Easter days; He's about life and what life can be, can be all the more easily when we stop stumbling around over Easter or over our questions and/or our ignorance and simply start dancing with the Spirit.

At the beginning of our worship we sang: “Easter people, raise your voices, sounds of heaven in earth should ring. Christ has brought us heaven's choices; heavenly music, let it ring.” Easter people are the people God wills us to be and are the people who live their lives *as if* the story of Jesus being raised from the dead was really true. *If* it is really true is another matter entirely is a small matter. Easter people, you and I, are all about inhaling Jesus' Spirit to the point it utterly fills our lungs, our lives, and we ourselves are the ones who breathe heavenly music on others. Easter, Pentecost, the Bible, religious traditions, all of it, it's all about “living ordinary lives extraordinarily well” (Wm Sloan Coffin). Faith, doubt, questions, ants, none of that ultimately matters because none of that ultimately hinders our ability to live *as if* the highest, most magnanimous, glorious, life-affirming and noble story ever told has an unbreakable hold on us. With the Holy Spirit nothing, absolutely nothing can hinder us from living ordinary lives extraordinarily well.

So, let it ring! Live as if it really matters. It certainly matters to Jesus...reason enough it seems. Praise be to God and Amen.