

Sara Gresh

Doing Memories

Apr 28, 2019

Let us pray - Holy and loving God open your word to us; Fill our hearts and this place with your spirit that we may not only hear your Word, but respond to it with love for others. Amen.

When I was in grade school, one of the paperback books I really enjoyed reading was Ripley's Believe It or Not! Robert L. Ripley was a reporter of the odd and unusual; he traveled to the farthest corners of the globe, visiting over 200 countries, meeting kings and queens, cannibal chieftains and natives along the way. You may think "Ripley's Believe it or Not" is passé' today. In fact, his Believe It or Not series have been popular around the world for nearly 100 years, syndicated in hundreds of newspapers and there are a number of active museums throughout the world. Staff people continued Ripley's search for odd and unusual things after his passing. An interesting note about him – he was buried in Oddfellows Lawn Cemetery in Santa Rosa, California. I think that quite fitting for him. Anyway, this was not the sort of reading my parents encouraged. Not that there was anything wrong with it, but it bordered on the sensational and flamboyant. They suggested Charles Dickens instead, or even Nancy Drew. I loved Ripley's. It was my chance for my world to be expanded and challenged. I was forced, in every picture to make a faith decision: do I believe this or not? Can I believe in a Fiji mermaid? Is it a tall tale or a fish tale? I wondered. And what about the Chinese Shrunken Head the size of a lemon? I believed it all. I was no doubting Thomas. I had not learned to play the skeptic. In fact, around the house,

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I would state various “facts” and say “I read it in a magazine.” Not just Ripley’s but any of the magazines at the time, and my older brothers would roll their eyes.

As many of you that have been involved in our church’s annual Trash & Treasure sale, the first Saturday in October, for those not familiar with – rummage sale, a discussion almost always occurs among the volunteers either during the week prior to the sale or the day of the sale “I don’t think we have as much stuff as last year” or “I think we have better quality items this year compared to last year.”

These overheard discussions have always made me laugh because unless someone is going to take the time to document the items in all the rooms and determine the quality of said items – it is impossible to compare year to year. One can’t even say one sale was more successful than another year’s sale just due to how much stuff is left over for the charity pick up. Every year the sale is unique, - due to the amount of donated items, quality of items, prices paid for items, the amount of extra contributions, and the quantity of shoppers. Some years certain things fly off the tables and other years those things hardly get looked at. Yet all of us eyewitness volunteers have our own take on things from year to year.

Many TV stations throughout the country have what they call “Eyewitness News” here in Northeast Ohio; I believe that is Channel 5, ABC. Eyewitness news can be tricky. Is eyewitness news trustworthy? Can we believe everything we see on TV or on the internet? Some say April Fool’s Day is the only day people actually question things they read on the internet. For much of society that is the only

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news source or resource for any information, news or non-news. Are people skeptic when they read and hear the news - then there is "Fake News"?

One of the main reasons Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead is because of the eyewitness testimonies. Without the eyewitness accounts of those who saw him alive after the crucifixion - and told about it - it would be pretty hard to make a case for the resurrection.

In The Book of Acts, the Apostle Peter addressed some gentiles gathered at the home of the Centurion name Cornelius. Peter said "We were witnesses to all that Jesus did in Judea and Jerusalem" meaning during Jesus' ministry. Then speaking of Jesus' death and resurrection, he said Jesus appeared "not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses." (Acts 10:41)

This is one of at least ten references in Acts to eyewitnesses affirming the resurrection of Jesus, and there are several other verses in the New Testament that allude to it as well. Paul even reports in 1 Corinthians that Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers "at one time."

But wait, Eyewitness testimony?

In court cases and the reversal of criminal convictions, eyewitness testimony has often been a huge problem. A report by the Innocence Project, an organization that uses DNA testing to exonerate those wrongfully convicted of crimes, says that since the 1990's, when DNA testing was first introduced, 73% of the 239

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convictions overturned through DNA testing were based on eyewitness testimony. One-third of these overturned cases rested on the testimony of two or more mistaken eyewitnesses. Inaccurate eyewitness accounts are sometimes attributed to factors like poor eyesight, memory decay, and something known as “eyewitness talk” where witnesses discuss what they saw with each other after an event and then change their minds about what they thought they saw based on the statements of other witnesses. There is an official term for this - “co-witness conformity” when eyewitnesses are influenced into including in their statements things they didn’t really actually see.

When the disciples came to Thomas with the fantastic news of Jesus being raised from the dead, they asked him, “Would you believe...that Jesus is risen? Would you believe...that Jesus who was brutally beaten and crucified is alive? Would you believe...that he appeared to Mary and to all of us?”

Thomas’ response was an emphatic, “No, I would not believe such an idle tale.”

In spite of the unbelieving rhetoric, we need to rehabilitate Thomas’ reputation. He has had to be known as “Doubting Thomas” throughout history. It doesn’t matter that Thomas was no better and no worse than the average disciple. It doesn’t matter that tradition has him carrying the Gospel to India. Nor does it seem to matter that this same tradition has Thomas suffering martyrdom for the faith. No, he will always be the doubtful one. Thomas - the patron saint of all of those who are the last to know.

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Thomas' reputation as a skeptic is not only undeserved, but is also the result of a maybe too casual reading of John's text. There are other places in Scripture where we see Thomas in action. Can the nickname worn by Thomas as a "doubter" color the way we read the other accounts of Thomas? Can Thomas teach us anything about what it means to believe?

In John chapter 11, we begin to learn a little about the personality of Thomas in an incident surrounding the death of Lazarus. In that story, Jesus tells the disciples that the time has come for them to go to Bethany that they might comfort the grieving family.

The disciples can hardly believe what they are hearing. Given the hostility of some in Jerusalem toward Jesus and the proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem, to go to Bethany at a time like this was nothing short of being crazy.

Thomas then speaks up and, addressing himself to his fellow disciples, says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (11:16)

To make such a statement, to take such a stand, requires no insignificant amount of devotion and courage. Here was one who was willing to lay down his own life in a spirit of solidarity with his Lord.

Is the courage of Thomas and his willingness to die diminished because of his later caution surrounding what he perceived as hysterical reports of Jesus' resurrection? If not, then why don't we remember him as "Courageous Thomas"

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rather than “Doubting Thomas”? Why should one event define the life of Thomas any more than another?

This first glimpse of Thomas should remind us that there is more to a person than a convenient “sound bite” of an experience.

The next time we hear about Thomas is in John 14. Thomas admits that he, for one, doesn't have a clue about what Jesus is talking about when Jesus speaks somewhat cryptically about his departure to do some heavenly site preparation. In verse 5, Thomas asks “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” This, in turn, leads Jesus to say one of the most memorable passages in the New Testament – verse 6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

It took remarkable, self-assured honesty for Thomas to acknowledge that, for him, Jesus was not making any sense. Why don't we call him “Honest Thomas” instead of “Doubting Thomas”? Because of his willingness to admit ignorance, we are all the wiser. Because of his honest confession, we are the recipients of hope-filled words that have sustained us through the years in our own times of loss and separation.

The third scene in which Thomas plays a significant role is found in today's Gospel text. Jesus appears among them fully aware of how incomprehensible his appearance is to the minds and experiences of the gathered ones. He takes the

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initiative and shows them his hands and side - the undeniable markings of the Crucifixion.

Let's not miss the significance of this. The astonishment of this group demanded proof, no less than the disbelief of Thomas, and, what is more, it demanded the same kind of proof. They doubted, just as Thomas doubted, and just as we would doubt if we had been in their place.

So this leads us to a more interesting question – “why has the Christian community developed such a negative attitude toward doubt?” We have been reared in a religious environment in which doubt is posed as the opposite of faith. And this story of Thomas is often used to reinforce that lesson, but isn't the “doubt vs faith” contrasting a false issue? Isn't the real enemy of faith - unbelief rather than doubt? So I am thinking that doubt has a constructive and positive role to play in the exercise of faith.

If you are like me, I don't want to be a “Doubting Thomas,” but I am frequently tormented with unresolved questions of faith.

We, as the church, often dismiss or discount doubts and questions as the products of an immature faith. Those of us that have mentored the young people going through Confirmation, we know they have lots of doubts and questions. Many times we simply repeat the same religious clichés that we found unsatisfying in our own struggles of faith. I think the least used three words in our religious vocabulary are “I don't know.”

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Couldn't we respond more positively to these questionings and doubts by using them as teaching moments? We can learn from Thomas that even though we don't know where our journey may lead, it is enough that our God makes the journey with us. In the words of the former singer/songwriter David Bailey – "faith won't provide you shelter in the storm, but it will go with you to seek wood for your fire" and "it matters not in what you put your faith, rather in Whom you put your faith." Leonard Sweet states in a commentary – "Faith is a belief held in the presence of doubt rather than a belief that removes all doubt."

And in the times when our faith needs the reinforcement of tangible reality, it is good to know that our Lord does not meet our doubts with chastisement, but with a display of grace. Thomas, in putting his finger in Jesus' wounds was making a memory for himself and for the others in the room. That yes, Jesus was resurrected. We are not eyewitnesses. We didn't encounter the Lord along the Emmaus road. We weren't in that closed room to see him display his hands and feet, and eat fish. No, in us, our Lord is looking for a different sort of witness. He is looking for us to be not eyewitnesses, but character witnesses.

That sort of witness sometimes has a part in court cases. If defense attorneys are angling to undermine the prosecutor's argument, they are likely to call one or more character witnesses – folks who know the defendant well, who are willing to vouch for that person, to observe how unlikely it is that their friend or colleague would ever commit a crime.

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You and I are called to be character witnesses for Christ. We can't tell firsthand stories about the resurrection other than the time worn accounts that have been passed down through the generations. But we can witness to a personal Christ, a living Lord, whom we know, one who has touched our lives and made a difference. Those are our memories that we need to share and pass on to others so that they may know the love of Christ.

We need to embrace the truth learned from the example of Thomas that doubts may not always lead to answers, but they almost always lead to growth. Believe it or not!