

# Out of Control

Rev. Gene Nelson  
The Community Church of Sebastopol, UCC  
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## **John 20:19-31**

Was Easter just a week ago? It is already starting to feel like Easter happened long ago. I suppose it is because here in the church there is so much build up and preparation for, so much energy put into, Holy Week and Easter. Then it's over. And when it's over, for most of us, it's back to business as usual – work, family, household chores, daily responsibilities, oh look, the presidential campaign is still on, and, oops, taxes are due. Oh yes, and there is preparation for a big change in my life and the life of this church in just a few weeks. It is hard to sustain the enthusiasm and hope of Easter once Easter is over and the day to day world intrudes once again.

But this is not only our issue. It was also an issue for the early church, an issue that the writer of the Gospel of John seemingly was well aware of. Most scholars believe that John is the latest Gospel, written near the end of the first century. Not too many eye witnesses were left. Jesus had been gone for a long time and there had been no second coming. Says one New Testament scholar, "John's problem, which is a continuing problem for the church, was how to encourage people in the faith when Jesus was no longer around to be seen or touched. The story of Thomas gave him a way to do that. By detailing the reluctant disciple's doubt, John took the words right out of our mouths and put them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do – or do not – come to believe."

The disciple, Thomas – "Doubting Thomas" – has received a lot of negative press over the years. Many sermons have been preached about his lack of faith – his demand for certainty. One hears the phrase, "Doubting Thomas" so much that it begins to sound like "Doubting" is his first name! But I wonder if perhaps we shouldn't cut Thomas a little slack. Is he really all that different from us?

I recall the story of a little girl who had a nightmare and cried out in the night. Her mother went to her and attempted to comfort her by saying, "Don't be afraid, dear. God will be with you." To which the girl replied, "I know that, Mommy. But tonight I want somebody with skin on." Isn't that exactly what Thomas wanted when it came to his faith – something, someone, with skin on it that he could see and touch, some verifiable evidence. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't mind some of that evidence myself.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared my faith journey as a part of our Tuesday night Lenten program. I was asked if there was some defining moment in my life when I knew, when I was certain, about my faith and about becoming a minister? I add to answer, honestly, no – no defining moment. My faith has been more evolutionary, a series of fits and starts, moment of intense knowing; moments of intense doubting and uncertainty. Following my presentation a church member came up and thanked me for that answer. She told me she has faithfully come to this church for 40 years, but still wonders about her faith, still wishes she had more certainty and fewer doubts. It was comforting for her to hear that her minister has been on the same journey. Could she be the only one in this church who feels that way... at least some of the time? I suspect not.

I recall a few years back when Mother Teresa created quite a stir when she shared her own dark night of the soul, times when she wondered, even doubted, if God was there at all. Mother Teresa – a model of Christian faith and selfless service – sharing her own doubt. Henri Nouwen, that great saint of the 20th century church, whose writings continue to inspire thousands of Christians and non-Christians throughout the world, once said, "Somehow I have to trust that God is at work in me..." Somehow I am just going to have to trust? Somehow? Even Henri Nouwen confessed to some lingering doubt. Their honesty reminds me of something the renowned physicist, Richard Feynman, once said: "The dumbest people in the world are those who think they know."

Returning to faith and doubt, Frederick Buechner, himself a man of great faith – and doubt - somewhat echoes Feynman when he says, "To speak of certainty and faith in the very same breath is a contradiction and is to miss the whole point of the Biblical story. There, men and women of the spirit live by faith, not by certainty. They are never fully free of doubt, but have enough faith to live with it. If you don't have doubts you are either kidding yourself or are asleep.... Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving. They keep us asking, keep us searching, keep us open." Imagine a congregation full of people who are searching, who are alive and moving and open, who are engaged with their faith even as they ask questions and

express doubts. That would be a pretty exciting place to be. Someone could spend many years in a place like that.

Getting back to Thomas, poet and Episcopalian lay leader, Amy Hunter, points out that Thomas really was no more of a doubter than the other disciples. Mary encounters angels telling her that Jesus is risen, but she doubts; Peter and John see the empty tomb and they doubt; the other disciples are told by the women that Jesus is raised yet they choose to remain huddled in a locked room, apparently worried about their own safety. It isn't until Christ actually stands among them that they believe. All Thomas asks for is the same experience they had. Says Hunter, "Thomas wants proof and he wants Jesus. When Jesus appears again and Thomas is there, far from rebuking Thomas, Jesus offers to meet his conditions... The personal encounter makes Jesus' resurrection real to this follower. He holds out for his own experience of Jesus. Thomas dares to doubt; Thomas dares to believe."

But we may still wonder, where are we in this story? Are we included in the circle, even though we are 2000 years removed from the events? How does the story become alive and real for us? How do we get some flesh on our faith?

I think of a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon. They are out walking when Hobbes – Calvin's tiger friend – suddenly asks, "Do you believe in God?" Calvin ponders this question for a moment, then says, "Well, someone is out to get me!" I suppose that is one experience of the divine. Here is another.

New Testament scholar, Thomas Long, began his career as a local church pastor. He remembers when he went to his first church – young, excited, full of hope. It proved to be a terrible experience. He recalls nothing but anger and mistrust and conflict between church members. One night, after a board meeting, people became so angry that they actually went into the church and tore out the pews their families had donated. Deputy Sheriffs had to be called. He says he couldn't wait to finish his time there and when he left, he never looked back.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Says Long, "A couple of years later, while visiting at Emory seminary in Atlanta, I ran into a young man who introduced himself and told me he was now working at that church. My heart went out to him immediately. Such a dear young man, and only 23!"

" 'They still remember you out there,' he said.

" 'Yeah,' I said glumly, 'I remember then too.'

" 'Remarkable bunch of people,' he said.

" 'Remarkable?'

" 'Their ministry to the community has been a wonder,' he continued. 'That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families around the church. The free day care center is going great. Not too many interracial congregations in North Georgia.'

Says Long, "I could hardly believe what I was hearing. 'What happened?' I asked.

" 'I don't know,' he replied. One Sunday things just sort of came together. It wasn't anything in particular. It's just that, when the service was done and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly took off after that.'

Concludes Long, "I'll tell you what happened. I think that church got intruded upon. I think someone greater than I knocked the lock off the door, kicked it open and offered them peace, the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. And now they are called, 'church.'"

The disciples weren't exactly like that church, but they were a pretty pitiful group – cowering behind a locked door, scared to death, timidly hanging on to each other. Seemingly not a group, not a church, with much of a future. Except that, when they gathered, Jesus pushed through the locked door, through their fear, their doubt, their grief, and stood among them. A word was spoken – "Peace be with you" – a spirit given, and even the doubters dared to believe. To a church with nothing, Christ gave everything – spirit, mission, peace, forgiveness, hope. And a world changed.

Yes, we have our doubts and as I have tried to say today, doubts are not necessarily bad. But, like Thomas, can we also dare to believe? Can we dare to believe that Jesus still comes among us, still breaks through any locked door, even the locked doors of our hearts, still speaks his word of peace and hope and still commissions us to take that word with us into the world? Do we dare to be a part of Christ's risen life on earth? For faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief and rely upon it. Or, as Martin Luther said, "Faith is not simply about believing that ship exists; it is about stepping into the ship and entrusting ourselves to it." Not a bad description of church. For we have seen the Lord. In the flesh? No. In the story? Possibly. In our life together? Absolutely!