

John 20:19-31
Unlocking our Upper Rooms
WRCOB 4.24.22

I had an email recently from someone who had a question.

The question was “Do you know if our loved ones in heaven
Are able to ‘look down on us’ from above?”

My reply was I simply didn’t know.

I couldn’t think of any scripture
Affirming or denying such a thing.

I did say that I knew people, more than one or two
Who’ve said they’d been “visited”
By deceased loved ones.

Other than their testimony, I couldn’t be sure.

I’m don’t think they were satisfied with my answer.

~~

When it comes to matters of faith
We all have questions, struggles and even doubts.

- Did Jesus really raise Lazarus from the dead?
- How can a loving God send people to hell for an eternity?
- Do we immediately go to heaven after we die or do we sleep until the final consummation?

Sometimes our questions go to the very core of our faith.

- Did Jesus really rise from the dead?
- Can faith really save us simply by believing?

- Is the Bible sufficiently capable of being an authority even in our day and age?

~~

Questions are a good thing.

Sometimes people worry that too many questions
Lead to doubt and doubt leads to disbelief.

That we shouldn't challenge our faith with questions.

But God is more than big enough to handle
Our questions, our struggles, and even our doubts.

The Bible can stand up to such scrutiny.

Faith that is not tried is not true

And even as we express doubt
The Holy Spirit can give us a peace about it

Some aspects of faith will always remain a mystery.

If we think we understand all there is of God
We have shrunken God down
To our own very limited understanding.

God wants us to challenge and question our faith.
As our new hymn suggests

*Ask the complicated questions, do not fear to be found out,
for our God makes strong our weakness, forging faith in fires
of doubt.*

~~

Today's Gospel lesson involves two separate occasions
Extending from Easter Sunday to the Sunday following.

The first part of our lesson takes place
On the evening of Easter Sunday.

This is, of course, the day
The women discover the empty tomb

And the same day Peter and Mary
Encounter the Risen Christ.

That evening they gathered in an upper room
Behind locked doors.

Some think the very same room
They shared their last supper.

~~

The atmosphere was charged

Charged with emotions our text describes in one word.

FEAR.

But with fear others feelings were there too.

GRIEF and DESPAIR that their Lord had been crucified.

WONDER and SKEPTICISM

At the women's announcement the tomb was empty.

DOUBT that Jesus had risen from the dead.

GUILT at their cowardly behavior.

And, most assuredly, a feeling of HOPELESSNESS

At the sharp turn of events from Palm Sunday to now.

Jesus comes and stands in their midst and blesses them.

Peace be with you.

Joy overwhelms them.

~~

The second part of today's gospel reading, John 20.26-31
Takes place a week later on this Sunday evening.

We don't know whether the disciples had gathered again
Or they were still occupying the room.

This time Thomas was with them.

Now Thomas was one of the original 12 disciples.

He was with Jesus from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry

He became known as Doubting Thomas
In my opinion, an unfair label.

Let's be clear, he never wavered as a follower of Jesus.

He may have asked questions, expressed his doubts
But he hung in there with the small group of followers.

~~

Looking back, when it was plain Jesus was heading
Into a very dangerous situation.

It was Thomas who bravely spoke up.

John 11:16 NRSV Let us also go, that we may die with him.

He was pragmatic
The one who asked the questions
Nobody else dared to ask.

On another occasion when Jesus was with the disciples
He tried to explain to them he was leaving.

But that he will come back and take them with him.

They know the place where he was going.

It was Thomas who asked the question
Everyone else wanted to ask.

**John 14:5 NLT “No, we don’t know, Lord,” Thomas said.
“We have no idea where you are going, so how can we
know the way?”**

And now today.

This second Sunday following Easter
Thomas is with the other disciples in the upper room.

He wasn’t there the previous Sunday when they saw Jesus.

They told Thomas of their meeting.

And in his honest and straightforward way he declared

**John 20:25 NRSV Unless, I see the mark of the nails in
his hands and my hand in his side, I will not believe.**

This second day, Jesus returns and stands in their midst.
And turns to Thomas

**John 20:27 CEV “Put your finger here and look at my
hands! Put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and
have faith!”**

And all Thomas could choke out was

John 20:28 NRSV “My Lord and my God!”

Our text invites us to consider what it takes
To believe in Jesus.

For some it takes an intuitive sense of the spirit.

For others the written Word is enough.

Still some it will takes an encounter with an angel.

For Thomas, it took the physical presence of Jesus.

Thomas was a realist.

He wasn't going to believe in fairy tales.

And if he didn't understand

He'd ask pretty direct questions.

But if not for Thomas

We wouldn't have this story

To help us in our own faith journeys.

Doubt encourages us to struggle with

What exactly it is that we do believe.

Questions challenge assumptions.

However, for any good to come out of doubt

One must ask the questions doubt produces.

As the Life Application Bible says in its commentary

Silent doubts rarely find answers.

~~

Ann C. Sullivan, author of *Permission to Doubt*

Wrote an article in Christianity Today entitled

Is it Okay to Doubt My Faith?

She writes that scripture encourages us
To ask the hard questions of faith.

In Scripture, believers are instructed to aggressively pursue all sides of faith: spiritual, intellectual, and emotional. In Deuteronomy 6:5, Moses instructs the children of Israel to love the Lord their God with their hearts, their souls, and their strength.

*In Matthew 22:37, Jesus splits the atom even further when he adds that we are to love the Lord our God with our **minds** as well. Yet, the moment our minds begin questioning our beliefs, we're overcome with guilt and fear.*

Sullivan talks about a time she visited her mother-in-law.

She had graduated from college
And was struggling with all kinds of doubt.

On that particular day she said a storm raged within her.

She asked her mom-in-law if she ever questioned her faith.

I watched for her reaction as she stood folding laundry still warm from the dryer. She paused, looked at me, and said, "No, never. We were taught not to ask questions." Then, she resumed her chore contentedly as I sat in amazement, wondering why I couldn't be more like her.

For many who grew up in the faith
To ask a question was a sign of unbelief
A sign of rebellion, or defiance or disrespect.

There was a fear that if we asked the hard questions
If we allowed doubt to creep into our faith

Our belief system would crumble
Under the severe interrogation.

But if our faith can't stand up to our questions
What kind of faith is it?

Thomas was a faithful follower of Jesus
Willing to go and die with him.

But he had a practical mind and wanted to be sure
He understood what was before him.

“Lord, we don't know where you are going
So how do we know the way?”

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hand
I cannot believe it”

Through his doubts and questions
He became a faithful follower of Jesus.

Christian tradition has Thomas
The first to bring the Gospel message to India.
And ended up the first Christian martyr there.

~~

We unlock the upper rooms of doubt
By asking the hard questions of faith.

The Christian faith is strong enough to bear them.

Ask the tough questions.

But strive to seek the answers
Even if it takes a lifetime.

Here are some ways to do it.

- **Read and study the Bible** on your own but better yet with others. Engage in the hard work of discerning biblical truth.
- **Challenge the preacher.** Don't assume he or she knows everything just because they got a degree in theology. Don't rely on others' perspectives on truth. Do the hard work of answering your own questions.
- **Read and learn about other faith traditions.** Compare them with the Christian faith. What makes sense? What doesn't? Don't think by doing so, your faith in Christ will weaken.
- **Learn the sciences.** Discover the latest theories on how the universe was created. Don't believe the sciences and faith are incompatible.
- **Discover answers in your prayer closet.** Just as the disciples retreated to their locked upper room, retreat into your place of prayer, whether it is on the beach or in your prayer closet and lift the tough questions directly to God.
- **Practice the faith.** There's much to learn as you stay obedient to God. You may not understand why at first. The answers may come later.
- **Serve one another in love.** A whole lot of questions are answered when we emulate the life of Jesus, his ministry and teachings.
- **And finally, realize some questions might never be answered satisfactorily.** And that's okay. The answers may come in time. They may not. God will always remain cloaked in mystery.

Don't let the questions of faith
Keep you locked in your upper rooms of doubt.

Like Thomas, engage Jesus
So that Jesus might reveal those things of faith

So that one day, you too, might exclaim with conviction
As did Thomas
“My Lord and my God!”