

St. John's Lutheran, Albany
3 April 2016

2 Easter – C

Acts 5:27-32

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Frederick Buechner, now in his late eighties, was ordained a Presbyterian pastor in the 1950's. But in spite of his ordination, he was primarily a writer who wrote novels and essay collections, all solidly faithful, but also all solidly probing deeply into the conundrums that are at the heart of the life of faith. Because Buechner was a writer and an educator before entering seminary, in 1958, he was assigned not to parish ministry but to a teaching position, tasked with developing a department of religion at Exeter Academy in Vermont.

Now in this quote I'll share with you, Buechner refers to Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schliermacher was an early nineteenth century theologian. His book, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* sought to reconcile traditional Protestantism with the rationalism of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and Buechner refers to that challenge in the quote I'll share. He feels the challenge to create a religious department at Exeter requires a similar effort to what Schliermacher tried to do. Buechner describes his position at Exeter this way: "My job, as I saw it, was to defend the Christian faith against its "cultured despisers." To put it more positively, it was to present the faith as appealingly, honestly, relevantly, and skillfully as I could."

I haven't read all that much Frederick Buechner, but what I have read I've liked a lot. And I also relate to him as someone who is both a writer and an ordained clergyman. These are vocations that are sometimes very much at odds with one another, the one requiring great swaths of time spent alone in a room with no distractions, no other people and the other a vocation teeming with people whose spiritual needs form the nucleus of parish ministry.

But I also relate to Buechner but I respect the honesty with which he writes about faith and the fact that he lived out is his ministry in a non-traditional setting—in a school rather than a parish. So last year when I came across this other Buechner quote in a midweek musing from our Synod, I tucked it away for use this year, knowing it would come in handy the next time we got around to talking about my second-favorite disciple, Thomas. (Mary Magdalene is my absolute favorite disciple and my oldest daughter, Madeleine, is named in her honor.)

So here's the Buechner quote I found last year:

Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake or moving. There are two principle kinds of doubt, one of the head and the other of the stomach. In my head, there is almost nothing I can't doubt when the fit is upon me—the divinity of Christ, the efficacy of the sacraments, the significance of the church, the existence of God. But even when I am at my most skeptical, I go on with life as though nothing untoward has happened.

You know, I like a truthful person. And to me, that quote is very truthful. I am suspicious of people who claim certainty and I honor those who wander through the mystery of faith, sometimes happily lost, sometimes confused and worried: “What does this mean?” was Luther’s question and it is a holy one.

And so that’s why I don’t take kindly to any criticism of my second-favorite, but still beloved disciples. Poor, maligned, mis-represented Thomas. Poor Thomas whose name it seems will forever be linked with the moniker “Doubting.” What a drag for him, especially since it is entirely untrue and unfair to think of him in those terms.

His concern for seeing, for touching the wounds of Jesus seem to me to be consistent with his views of ministry—direct and hands-on, as we will see in a moment. He is driven to make the ministry and message of Jesus real. So is it really surprising that he wants the resurrection to be something so real he can reach out and touch it, too?

He wanted proof that Jesus was resurrected after he had witnessed Jesus’ arrest and beating, after knowing that he had been brutally crucified. Resurrection made no sense to him. Not after all that.

Besides, we can hardly say that the other disciples were exemplary in how they reacted to the news of resurrection, either. I mean, after all, last week we get the story of Mary Magdalene, the first evangelist, who goes to the tomb and is the first to see the resurrected Jesus, the first to preach the news to her brothers in the faith. But according to Luke’s gospel, when she tells the brothers in the faith of the resurrection, they don’t believe her. The text says, “These words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.” I leave it to you to decide if Mary’s gender had anything to do with why they didn’t believe her so-called “idle tale.”

Then, staying with Luke’s gospel, we get the story of the disciples walking the Emmaus Road. None of them even recognizes Jesus until they are all sitting down to eat together. And when they do recognize him, they are startled, fearful. According to Luke’s gospel writer, Jesus says, “why do doubts arise in your hearts?” And then he shows them the wounds on his hands and his feet, same as he does with Thomas in the gospel of John.

So why did we persist in using that perjorative phrase, “a doubting Thomas” to describe anybody who is skeptical, cynical or lacking faith? The disciple Thomas has taken it on the chin for centuries simply because he made that great state-of-Missouri demand: Show me! Over the years biblical commentators have made big statements about Thomas’ little faith.

But I can never resist Thomas. I love him for his passion and stubbornness. I love him for his conviction. I believe that if Thomas wanted to understand what he was doing in following Jesus with a lively faith, then he had to ask questions or his ministry wouldn’t have meant much at all—one way in which Thomas is such a good model for us because an unquestioning kind of faith is not a very active one. Or, as the theologian Paul Tillich put once, speaking of his ministry, “Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless, and doubt to the faithful.”

Thomas can help us with that.

I understand Thomas’ resistance to let himself be opened up to the possibility of good news. He’d already been happy to be Jesus’ disciple and that happiness had been stripped from him by the crucifixion; he didn’t even want to consider the possibility of happiness only if he were to lose it again. After all, Thomas was the disciple who had wanted to go the whole way with Jesus, just the way Jesus’ mother did, just the way Mary Magdalene did.

Remember how, when Jesus wanted to visit Lazarus’ grieving family and the journey there was through dangerous territory, the other disciples warned Jesus against making the trip. It is Thomas, then, who shows the greatest devotion to Jesus’ ministry. Disregarding his own safety, Thomas says of the journey, “Let us go also, that we may die there with him.”

Later, when Jesus is having his last supper with the disciples, he tells them that he is going to his Father’s house and that the disciples know the way he is going. But Thomas is not content with metaphor or with ambiguity. He presses Jesus for concrete details about the journey in faith. “We do *not* know the way you are going. How *can* we know the way?” he asks. You can hear the urgency in those sentences, can’t you?

Some commentators have said that this is proof that Thomas is a dim-bulb when it comes to having faith, as if Thomas somehow *should* have known all about the mystery of the God we worship.

But how could he? How much is fair to expect from a human disciple? Thomas had been there and seen the glory of Jesus calling forth the dead Lazarus from a tomb, only to see that same Jesus, a few days later, arrested, tortured and beaten. It must have been massively confusing.

Is that when Thomas ran away, if that’s what he did? And if so, where did he go? Where did any of the disciples go, except maybe away—out of fear, out of confusion. Because by the time Jesus had been taken into custody and condemned to death, there was nothing that Thomas or any of the disciples could have done to

save him. And maybe they were, by then, concerned about saving themselves. Remember, Peter denies him. Three times. The disciples flee. Thomas, who earlier in the gospel of John had said he would die with Jesus, does no such thing. But he's no worse than the other disciples for talking a bigger game than he was really able to play.

And when news of the resurrection gets out, Thomas doesn't believe it. When he hears what the disciples have to say, he wants none of it. He doesn't want to open himself up to further loss and greater heartbreak. Who can blame him if he doesn't believe his friends? Who can blame him for saying, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and I put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe"? Who's to blame him for saying that instead of "Christ has risen! Christ is risen indeed!"

He doesn't want to be anybody's *fool*, believing "idle tales." He wants to be Jesus' *disciple*, doing ministry.

And yet—and yet, when Thomas finally does put his hands in Christ's wounds, he says what none of the other disciples have yet said. Thomas takes the peace that Jesus gives to him and turns it into a remarkable confession of his own resurrected faith: "My God and my Lord."

Thank God, thank God abundantly for the story of Thomas who gives us a chance to see for ourselves that those who don't believe, those who can't let themselves believe for fear of being somebody's fool, may yet be made to be God's disciple with a pure and strong faith. Thank God for Thomas who is not anybody's fool, but God's new creation: the disciple transformed by faith to see the still unseen Godhead in the risen Jesus Christ.

It is Easter, after all, and God calls non-being into being, doubt into faith, our despair into the richest joy. It is Easter, after all, and God is still speaking, turning each of us—right now!—into a new creation, a creation of faith. Perhaps we can speak it even now, perhaps this moment we can breathe with pure delight the words of freedom and the words of glory: "Christ is risen! My Lord and my God, you are risen indeed!" Amen.