



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

Honest Doubt

Easter 2, c, 4/11/2010

John 20:19-31

Interestingly, there are some scholars that believe that the original gospel of John ends with this account. The New Testament contains another chapter in John's gospel, but these scholars believe that in the 21st chapter is a later addition to the gospel. How fitting it might be if John wrote his account to end here, with the story of "doubting Thomas," fitting for our generation surely.

Ours is a skeptical age. We need to be shown before we can believe, and certainly Thomas would be patron saint of skepticism. Now I think it only fair to say that skeptics today and Thomas differ on why they find it hard to believe Christ was risen. Thomas' worldview had no problem embracing the miraculous and the wondrous. He had seen it repeatedly in the ministries of Jesus. No, he had another problem we'll get to later. But for those who have trouble believing today, the difference is that we have a much harder time believing in anything that contradicts what we understand to be laws of nature.

Thomas was singularly fortunate that he had the opportunity to see and touch the risen Christ, where as we of generations hundreds and thousands of years later are both comforted and challenged by Jesus response “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” We are comforted because Jesus anticipated this would be our situation, but we are challenged because we are called on to believe without seeing. We may have plenty of other kinds of evidence of the presence of the work of Christ in our lives, but seeing him and touching him probably won't be among them.

In our circumstance, then it is important for us to seek out and then carefully attend to other kinds of witnesses to the work and the power of Christ. One kind of such experience you may have read in yesterday morning's Austin American-Statesman where Bob Lively discusses the powerful Christian witness made by a friend of his at First Presbyterian Church who recently passed away. If we are lucky enough to come into the presence of someone who's witness is so powerful, it makes our pathway to faith so much easier.

One such witness of faith was a fellow by the name of Mel Hollander. I believe I read the story of Mel in a book by Tony Campolo, but don't quote me on that attribution.

“In the late 1960's Mel Hollander was in Vietnam as an American civilian social worker. Doctors discovered that Mel was suffering from a cancer of the lymphatic system and estimated that he had, at most, 6 months to live. Mel was a promising writer, 23 years old. He was already dispirited by the climate of death in Vietnam, and now he was deeply depressed by its sudden invasion of his own

body. He went to New York in hopes of a medical cure. His doctors could not find one.

He heard of a course at Union Theological Seminary for those who would be working with the dying. Mel went there, and while he was there, he heard of another course that Daniel Berrigan was teaching. As self-pitying as Mel was at that time, there was still in him some of the curiosity that had led him to Vietnam. He was curious about Berrigan, whom he knew was a Jesuit priest and a leader in America's anti-war movement. Mel arrived at the appointed classroom for the Berrigan lecture. Other students arrived. Dan Berrigan arrived. The hour for the class to start arrived. And it passed. The room was silent and still. Mel didn't realize it was Dan's custom to begin his classes with a period of meditative silence. The silence made Mel terribly nervous. By now he was a very pale, withered figure in the late stages of his cancer -- and when Dan's eyes settled on him, Mel became even more nervous. He thought perhaps the class was silent because they were waiting for the uninvited guest to leave. But Mel held his seat -- when you're going to die, the dictates of politeness lose their force.

At last the silence was broken. Dan Berrigan looked directly at Mel and asked him, -- "What's the matter?" . . . Mel briefly considered various responses, including "It's none of your business." But these responses seemed useless to him, so he said to the rather rude Jesuit, "I'm dying. I'm dying of cancer." Berrigan's response was immediate: "That must be very exciting."

Confrontation with death, with the awful power of death made present in a young life normally brings shock, pity and horror. Religious people promise their

prayers. Others swallow in silence. Most people flee. Few can imagine thinking, much less announcing, “That must be very exciting.”

But for Mel this brief, impossible sentence fell into his life like a stroke of lightning, a transfiguration. “Yes!” he thought, “How true! It is the most extraordinary event of my life! I have never before faced death. I have never before lived with such an awareness of life.”ⁱ . . . In the following, euphoric days of his transfiguration, somehow the cancer completely evaporated from his body. He had not believed that miracles actually occurred, until one happened to him.

Mel enrolled at Union Seminary, and after completing his degree, he worked full-time in the anti-war movement. When the Vietnam war ended in 1975, Mel was one of the first to write about, and organize on behalf of the refugees who poured out of Vietnam” . . . and one of the things folks “most admired about Mel Hollander, was that after years of writing against the war, unlike many of his associates,” he didn’t just walk away from Vietnam after the war was over. He stayed committed to the people there who were continuing to undergo horrendous trials long after the American forces left. Mel wrote about and protested against the firing squads there and the wholesale liquidation of captured enemy soldiers and the construction of re-education camps.

“Living a life he had not expected to have, he was given the courage to speak truth to power, as a Christian, in all its complexity. Mel not only outlived his first death sentence but, until his death 10 years later in a fire, he lived one of the most extraordinary and spirit-filled lives” many around him had even known.

“The story I have just told is a true story, but it also functions as an allegory. In this allegory, Mel is ourselves, with all our secret fears, our self-pity, and our unconfessed dreads which imprison our lives and which paralyze our response to suffering. But for Christians, Dan Berrigan is also us, for in this allegory he stands for the church, the faithful church that witnesses to the way of Christ in the world. The response of a faithful church in this fearful, frequently brutal and bewildering world is to bring the good news to the captives, to find a way of saying ‘Isn’t it exciting?’”

Now, the only way that someone would be able:

- to embrace a terminal diagnosis,
- to embrace a difficult lot in life, or

- to embrace a pathway to the Cross, is by finding that fear of earthly death has evaporated. The way the early Christians walked so full of faith and fearless was because they had been all the way through death on Good Friday and had absorbed the worst the world could throw at them and even then they emerged victorious on Easter Sunday. The excitement, the energy that we feel as we read through the stories of Jesus and the early Christian church is saturated with this experience of victorious living -- that nothing, “nothing in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:39)

But victory came after a terrible journey. It does not seem strange to me that after all the pain fullness of Good Friday and holy Saturday that Thomas the apostle would have questioned whether or not Jesus had arisen from the dead. Not because he didn't believe in miracles or the power of God, but because he had been

so deeply hurt. His dreams had been smashed. His world had collapsed. He was not ready to invest himself again in some painful personal commitment without more proof. "Unless I see... I will not believe."

I think there a lot of us that are in the position of Thomas. All my life I've heard enticing stories about unidentified flying objects some people that I know believe wholeheartedly in. We've all heard of people who put their faith in weeping statues of the Virgin Mary. I don't know. Perhaps these are true, but I'm not going to believe in them. Until I see them I will not believe.

On the other hand, if you are a lover of stories be they in the Bible, another book, in a song, or in a movie, you know that a good story doesn't just tell you about something that happened once upon a time. A good story presents a world to you and then invites you to walk around in it and experience it, live it for yourself. You can try out different actions and activities and see how they work in another world. And sometimes what you find there changes you for ever.

How many of you have seen the new movie Avatar? If you have not, the great movement of the movie is that of a parapalegic Marine named Jake Sully, an adventurer turning into a hero, injecting himself into life on another planet, Pandora, in order to manipulate the residents there to move from their home as a big earthly business enterprise desires. But as Jake learns his way around that world and falls in love with the people of that world and finds he has magnificent powers and a thrilling life.....appreciates the ways in which things happen and elements of that world interact, by the conclusion of the movie he's ready to stake his entire existence on helping the people of Pandora fight back against his own people of Earth.

I think that this is exactly the author of the Gospel of John's mission in the Bible, to invite people like me and perhaps you -- the skeptical ones to enter into the world of the early Christians and re-experience it. The author wants us to be able to trust in the resurrection of Jesus even without seeing and touching him. John wrote his gospel maybe 70 years after Jesus resurrection and certainly there were people in his own day who were beginning to question whether or not the resurrection had happened as they had heard or whether it was a fable. Our gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all say flat out that their intent is to help us know the story and to trust in God's power to raise Jesus from the dead, that that power is still active and able to bring us all to experience that New Life.

We have collected in our bibles all the most important stories, teachings, insight, that we could ever need. Add to that our life as a community, our worship and service together, and this book becomes the pathway, the portal, to a new and better world that God has from the beginning of time intended to be our real home.

Thanks be to God!

ⁱ

See also work of the poet Mark Nepo was brush with a terminal disease opened his life up.