

Preached by JF Hudson at WCUC: 4/27/03
Scripture: John 20:19-31

"I Doubt It"

"Do you believe in God?" That is a question which has been put to and asked by human beings, seemingly forever. A question answered by the famous and the infamous, the faithful and the questioning, the churchgoer, the agnostic and the atheist. "Do you believe in God?" The recently deceased science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke replied, "I don't believe in God, but I'm very interested in her." The comedian W.C. Fields, a lifelong agnostic, read the Bible as he lay on his death bed. When asked why this last minute belief, Fields is said to have replied, "I'm looking for loopholes!" The newspaper columnist H.L. Mencken, the early 20th century's most famous atheist, said, "I do not believe in God because I do not believe in Mother Goose." Or consider the reply of architect Frank Lloyd Wright: "'I believe in God, only I spell it Nature."

"Do you believe in God?" One of the most compelling answers I discovered to this age old question was offered by Doctor Carl Jung, who along with Sigmund Freud, was the co-founder of modern psychology. "Do you believe in God?" an interviewer asked him. Jung replied, "No, I do not believe in God. I know God." "I do not believe in God. I know God."

To believe in God...to know God. Now by virtue of the fact that all of us are here this morning on the Sunday after Easter, it is safe to assume that most if not all of us certainly believe in God. Americans, in fact, more so than any in any other modern western country: we are a nation of God believers: consider these recent Gallup poll statistics: 96 percent of Americans believe in God; 90 percent say they pray on a regular basis; 93 percent of American homes have a Bible; 87 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christian; more than 40 percent of us claim to attend church, synagogue or mosque weekly.

So--we do believe in God and yet my friends, at least for me, Jung's answer challenges us believers to rethink this whole notion of belief, how we define belief in God, what it truly means to believe in a Higher Power, an Overarching Spirit which supports and creates all existence. Jung's answer suggests that religious belief is not as simple as mere intellectual agreement or willful ascendancy to an idea, a notion, a truth.

Do you believe in God? Sure. But here's a tougher question. Do we know God? Do we want to know God and to be known by God?

To know God, to really know God: human heart to divine heart, human soul enveloped within God's love, human faith convicted of God's truth: is that our quest? It certainly is the passion, the drive which pushes the infamous "doubting Thomas" to insist he will not believe that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead until he puts his hands in the actual wounds Jesus suffered on the cross. Thomas doesn't just want to believe Christ loves: he wants to know him and the only way he can know him is by embracing Jesus face to face, flesh to flesh, eye to eye.

Thomas has always gotten a bad rap, is often judged as less of a believer than those other apostles in today's gospel story? I confess that when hearing that gospel story I'm always tempted to imagine myself as the disciple who would believe right away, would never need such proof. Yet there is Thomas, full of chutzpah and so much love for

Jesus that he cannot, he will not risk having his heart broken by false hopes, by rumors of resurrection, by tales told by others. He's from Missouri--"Show me!" And so Jesus does, "Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'

"Do not doubt but believe." When I 'hear' Jesus say those words, the tone of voice I imagine is one of care, compassion and tenderness for his dear friend Thomas, who just wants to see him again, love him again, be with him again, and know him again. I hear Jesus saying, "Do not doubt but know, know me."

Belief in God or knowledge of God—that may be a much more important question than the simplistic query: “Do you believe in God?” A God, who took human form, who walked among us, who went to the cross, who died, and who incredibly, unbelievably, overcame death and lives again. Is that the power, the savior, the truth, the spirit, that we do not just believe in, but actually want to know too, know?

For me, belief is the first step of faith, not the last. Belief in God is the easiest of declarations, one which carries with it little or no risk. Saying “I believe in God”—if this statement is then not backed up by action, by conviction, by lifestyle and not just by lip service—“Well of course I believe!”—is not that kind of a hollow belief? Faith window dressing: “Well he talks like a Christian!”

Like sometimes when I am at Fenway Park, and the national anthem begins, and we all stand up and the men all remove their hats, and the folks put hands over hearts, and that huge red, white and blue flag flaps in the distance—and then we sing of all these noble ideas: freedom, democracy, sacrifice, liberty. I wonder. Do these ideas, does this show of shared “patriotism”, does it really mean anything beyond the ritual, the recitation of an old familiar song? I look around and think: how many of us here really put flesh and bone to the notion of this democracy that we so fervently lionize in a secular hymn? How many folks here vote? Volunteer in their communities? Sacrifice for their neighbors? Serve in the military? Would give up something, anything for their fellow countrymen? And how many here are actually thinking about say...what condiments we'll put on that first hot dog or who's pitching come the first inning?

I hope that doesn't sound too flip but: the act of believing: in something, in anything, in God: I truly believe that such belief only matters if, when that belief translates into knowledge then knowledge into action. The thing I love most about Thomas is that for him belief is not enough. He's got to know. It's got to make a difference in his life. It's got to matter beyond just an idea, words, stories, memories. Thomas rejects the idea of a resurrected Jesus and goes straight for the gift of knowing and being known by Jesus.

Belief...knowledge. That's what is at stake in this post-Easter time, in our Christian faith. Not just telling the tale of Jesus but walking with the real Jesus now, in 2008. Not just agreeing with resurrection but living resurrection too. Not only saying how important it is too remember the homeless, the poor as Jesus did, but then doing something about that hope too: writing postcards to legislators, building a Habitat house, sharing our wealth. Not merely being conformed to a belief, words on paper, but instead being transformed by a relationship with a living God.

“Do you believe in God?” Maybe that's the wrong question to start with in our quest for faith. “Do you know God?” That's the real question. So: how will we answer? Let all God's people say, “Amen!”

