

Now do you believe me?

John 20:19-31

4-28-19

When I was a kid, there was this book that I loved, loved, loved —
a book which I think kids still read and love today,
at least I hope so —

it was called *the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Written by C.S. Lewis, who was a brilliant theologian for grown-ups
but also wrote pretty awesome books for kids.

The premise of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
was that there are these four kids in England,
four siblings — two brothers, two sisters,
and they're sent to stay at their grandparents' house —
it's World War II, and they have to get out of London because of the bombings.
And maybe you know how the story goes —
one day they're playing hide and seek, and the youngest girl, Lucy,
finds this huge, old wooden wardrobe, filled with old coats —
and she climbs into it to hide.
And pushing her way back behind the coats
she suddenly discovers that she's stepped into another land —
it's the land of Narnia. You remember this story.

And Narnia has centaurs and fauns and talking animals,
and a majestic lion named Aslan.

And Lucy has hours of adventure in Narnia
until she eventually emerges back through the wardrobe into her real life,
eager to tell her siblings what she's discovered.

Side note —

Growing up, my grandparents lived just a couple miles away from us,
in an old grand house,
and in my grandparents' bedroom was, yes,
a huge old wooden wardrobe.

And so enthralled was I by that book that I did in fact — probably more than once — climb into my grandmother's wardrobe, and I poked around behind *her* coats just to see if perchance there were some talking animals and centaurs to be found. I believed in Narnia.

Which is not, however, how Lucy's siblings responded — back to the book now.

They do not believe in Narnia.

When she re-emerges from the wardrobe and tells her brothers and sister where she's been and what she's found,

she encounters, not surprisingly, a certain amount of skepticism.

Especially from her brother Edmund,

who tells her she's lost her marbles

and says he doesn't believe a word she's saying and won't believe until he sees it himself.

You know the story, they all eventually do get to Narnia, and everyone, even Edmund, ends up a believer.

And I was thinking about how in every book, in every movie, where there's something improbable that happens,

something unbelievable, something amazing.

there's always that one guy, that Edmund.

There's always the one guy who refuses to believe,

the one guy who won't believe anything anyone tells him until

it smacks him right in the face.

Think about it.

Field of Dreams. Remember that one?

Kevin Costner hears a voice that tells him 'if you build it, they will come,'

and he understands that the 'it' he's supposed to build is a ball park —

and he plows under a whole field of corn — and he builds the field.

And his wife is so kind and supportive and believes him,

but then there's the Edmund —

in this case it's his wife's brother who tells him he's nuts —
and even when the spirits of long-gone ballplayers start emerging from the corn and
playing on that field of dreams,
even when other people are seeing them too, not just Kevin Costner,
that Edmund guy — I can't remember his name in the movie —
he doesn't believe it. Doesn't see anything.
Until the climactic moment when he *does* see.
And Kevin Costner says "now do you believe me?"
And he does. He sees, he believes. And it's a pretty cool scene.

Or — Ghostbusters.

I am now totally dating myself with all my cultural references.
Actually, any ghost-related movie works here —
because there's always the character who refuses to believe what's out there until it
comes busting through the door,
or — to stick with the Ghostbusters analogy —
until there's a gigantic Stay Puft Marshmallow Man walking down the streets of New
York.
"Now do you believe us?" someone always yells.
And yeah, he finally does.
The Edmund. There's an always an Edmund.

So, in fact, the Easter story has its Edmund.
Yes, the Gospel story of Jesus' resurrection — the heart of our faith as Christians —
that story also has that guy,
the guy who just won't believe it,
can't believe it, not until he sees it himself.

What [Ellen/Zach] just read to you is the perfect scripture story for today,
one week after Easter,
because it tells us that it *was* one full week after the Resurrection of Jesus that the one
last hold-out among Jesus' friends
finally believed what had happened.
He's the Edmund of the story.
Only his name is Thomas.

And yes, it takes him a *week* to be convinced.

Here's how the story goes.

On the actual day of Easter,

Thomas was the one who somehow managed to keep being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Or at least, never in the right place at the right time.

It was the women followers of Jesus who had gone to the tomb on that Sunday morning and seen the empty tomb.

It was Mary who had actually encountered Jesus outside the tomb.

And then on Easter evening it was all the *other* disciples who had had Jesus appear right before them.

All the other disciples *except* Thomas get to hear the risen Jesus say to them -

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Beautiful, comforting, important words —

which Thomas doesn't get to hear,

because he's just not there.

The story doesn't say where he was —

he literally could have been out picking up food for everyone,

we don't know.

But when he returns,

and everyone tells him who it is they have just seen —

he says — “I don't believe it.”

He's got all these people telling him this amazing good news — that Jesus really is alive —

and this is what he says:

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, I will not believe.”

That's Thomas.

Forevermore known as Doubting Thomas.

The one who insisted that he had to see it himself.

The one who wouldn't take anyone else's word for it.

So what happens?

Jesus comes back.

Just for Thomas, it appears. Just for Thomas.

A week later, they're all together again, all of Jesus' friends, just like before, only Thomas is there this time.

And Jesus comes to them again, again miraculously and mystically.

And he goes right to Thomas and says,
put out your hands, touch my wounds,
see, believe — don't doubt, believe.

My Lord and My God, says Thomas.

My Lord and my God.

And that's it. He's all in.

But forevermore he's known as doubting Thomas.

The Edmund of the story, the one who had to be convinced.

And for that, he's always been disparaged.

But is that fair?

Is it really that surprising that Thomas had some questions about what he was hearing?

Isn't it pretty understandable that he would have some wonderings?

I mean, a week ago, he comes back to the apartment and everyone says,
"oh, so sorry you missed it, Jesus was actually just here."

Wouldn't you wonder? question? doubt?

And don't we still?

When we gathered in this church last Sunday,
a thousand strong,

and we listened to the story proclaimed of the women and the empty tomb,

don't you think there were more than a few people
among us thinking "really? for real?"

I've got some questions about that."

And is that so bad? To have some doubts, to have some questions?

I read a wonderful reflection on Thomas
some time ago
that said that actually the way to think about Thomas
is not in a disparaging way,
but to think of him as someone who was passionate for the truth.
Who asked the questions not because he believed less,
but because he truly wanted to believe more.
And that there is no shame in asking questions, wondering, doubting.

I believe that, quite honestly.
I believe that faith is something that grows and strengthens and changes and grows
again —
and I think that the way that happens is through our questioning,
our listening, our wondering, even our doubting.
Asking the questions gives God an opening.

I got in trouble once for suggesting that.
I've probably got in trouble more than once, but there's one I particularly remember.
I was still in seminary, a student at Yale Divinity School,
but I was also working as a part-time minister at the First Church of Christ in New
Haven,
known as Center Church, because it's the central one of the three grand churches on
the New Haven Green.
And being 'First Church' we were often the ones to get the phone calls
whenever someone needed a token minister.
Round up the usual suspects, the news anchor would say,
and someone would call Center Church. Us.
I was pretty junior as a staff member, so it wasn't my quotes that got in the news.
Except this time, this one time.
A movie had just come out called *The Last Temptation of Christ*,
and people were getting very riled up,
same as they did later with *The Da Vinci Code*.
The movie focused on Jesus' human side,
and there were cries of heresy everywhere and church leaders forbidding their
congregants to go see it.

Anyway.

Center Church got a phone call asking for a token minister to be on WTNH, the TV station, for a live panel discussion.

Our secretary assured them I'd be glad to do it.

I was 24.

They put me on a panel with two older male pastors who were VERY unhappy about this movie, and were very expressive about that.

And then the anchorwoman, Diane Smith, asked me what I thought.

I said that I thought anything that made us think hard

and ask questions about our faith was a good thing,

and that faith grows through searching and asking and even doubting.

There was a brief pause, because no one really seemed to be expecting that,

and then the clergymen became apoplectically angry with what I'd said.

All of which ended up with someone pointing out that I was only in seminary and not a real pastor anyhow, and that was that.

They were very sure, those pastors,

and they didn't want anyone in their churches to be provoked into questions or wonderings.

But I still believe that it's in the searching and seeking and questioning that our minds are most open to God.

Asking questions gives God an opening.

Puzzling, wondering, seeking — all of that gives God the chance to come in, lets grace flood into the open places in our heart.

Thomas, in that room long ago, demanding to know more,

yearning passionately for the truth

asking God what is this, what is this that's happened —

all of that, that questioning,

was what brought him into the presence of Christ.

All of that was what let the living Christ into his presence.

My Lord and my God, Thomas finally said in wonder, in belief.

My Lord and my God.

Tomorrow evening,
our Confirmation class will have their last class together.
It will be the last time we are together as fellow travelers on the journey of faith - -next
Sunday they will stand up here to be confirmed.
And tomorrow night I'll ask them if they have any more questions about faith,
about Jesus and the Spirit and God the Creator.
And what I will want to hear from them is Yes. Yes, we still have questions.
I hope they have a ton of them.

And I will say to them what I say to you,
don't be ashamed of the questions.
Own them, speak them, rejoice in them.
Be the Thomas who needs to know more in order to believe.
Let God hear your questions, just as Jesus heard Thomas'.
Let God hear your questions, for then and only then,
do you give God an opening.
Then and only then do you invite Jesus in.
Then and only then will it be possible for you to stand with Thomas in that room,
in that room with Christ,
and say — with all your heart — My Lord and my God.
My Lord and My God.

Amen.