



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So my daughters are named Alina and Gianna, but I sometimes wonder if we should have named them Martha and Mary. Y'all remember Martha and Mary, the sisters who had Jesus over for dinner? And Martha is famously busy cleaning the house, desperately trying to make sure it's all just right, pestering her sister for not helping. Mary, meanwhile, she's in the living room, totally oblivious to all this fussing. Sitting at Jesus's feet fully present, soaking it all in.

That, okay, is Alina in a nutshell. She has always been a kind of free spirit, always singing, always delighting in whatever she's doing. So much so that the outside world and whatever she's supposed to be doing just seems to disappear. Gianna, on the other hand, she has always been my Martha. She knows what needs to get done. She knows what order to do it in. She has to-do lists. She cleans up without being asked, and she will even try to pester her sister into staying on task, like Martha. And like Martha, she does so to absolutely no avail.

Do we have any Marthas in the room, out of curiosity? Who are my organized doers? Yes, we're Episcopalians. We have plenty of Marthas, I think. How about Marys? Where are my folks who are totally good at being in the moment? Raise your hand. I want to see my Marys. Yeah, we have a few. I think we probably have a little bit of each in all of us, because we need them both. We need our Marthas because they help us to stay organized and practical. And we need our Marys because they help us to set aside our busyness so we can experience the grace of God that is right in front of us.

And I bring all this up because I wonder if these two archetypes might also have something to say about the different ways we come to faith. Because it seems to me that for some of us, our faith can seem effortless. It's intuitive, it's felt, it doesn't get caught up in details or tangled up in questions. It seems to just be a matter of opening your heart, and it all just flows from there. But the rest of us, I think we start more with the head, don't we, than the heart? We ask questions. We want things to make sense. We get bothered by contradictions. We want a faith that can withstand scrutiny, not because we don't love God, but because we take God too seriously to trust too easily.

And so this all was playing out in my kitchen last week as I was trying to explain Holy Week to the girls, about how each one of these different services helps us to more experience the joy of the resurrection. And Alina, true to form, she just smiled and said, aw, that's beautiful, Dad. But Gianna, on the other hand, well, I'm not so sure about that. And I said, oh, really? Why is that? And she says, well, if God resurrected Jesus, why didn't God also resurrect Uncle Peter? So I explained, well, Uncle Peter is in a much better place now. He's resurrected with God, where there is no suffering, no more sadness, just eternal joy. And without missing a beat, she's like, if that's true, why don't we all just start there? Why do we have to have any suffering and sadness? To which I said, I'm running late. I need to get to church. Can we pick this up later?

And I bring this up because I wonder if Thomas wasn't so much of a doubter, as he's sometimes called, but simply somebody who starts off more in the head. Someone who just needs his faith to make sense. Something that he can wrap his mind around so he can then open up his heart. Which brings us, I think, to the role of doubt in our journey of faith, because I think a lot of us can get nervous around doubt. Somewhere along the line, we picked up the idea that doubt can be the enemy of faith, and that if we start asking too many questions, well, somehow the whole thing might start to unravel. So we keep our doubts to ourselves often. We don't tend to talk about them. We don't want to offend somebody, and we certainly don't want them to rub off on somebody we care about.

But that's not how scripture talks about doubt. In fact, the Bible seems to assume that doubt is just a normal part of faith, even for the people who are closest to God. Think back when God tells Abraham that they will soon bear a son in their nineties. Abraham laughs at God. When God appears to Moses and says He will lead the people out of slavery, Moses says, you've got the wrong guy. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane pleads with God that this cup might pass from Him.

Over and over the scriptures paint a picture of doubt that is not a sign of a weak faith, but is evidence of a faith that is alive. A faith that is challenging us, that is inviting us to trust, to venture out, and even change in ways we could never imagine. Paul Tillich, one of the great Christian thinkers, famously said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith at all. It's actually a vital element of faith. Because faith is always reaching for something that we can't verify, we can't fully prove, and we certainly can't control. And so there will always be an element of uncertainty. Tillich says, our doubts are not signs of failures, but signs that our faith is alive. Doubt can even be like birth pains of a new faith. That is the pain and the disorientation we feel when our old beliefs and our old dogmas no longer work, and we begin to strive for a deeper, more resilient faith we can't quite name yet, but it's waiting to be born.

And while that may make sense on paper, I realize that it doesn't always make it any easier. Because when you are in the grip of doubt, it is painful. It doesn't feel very faithful at all. It can feel unsafe. It can make us feel untethered and even alone. But there is grace even in that because those very feelings, the ache, the longing, the questions, the birth pains, if you will, they can be themselves a sign of faith because they reveal that something within us, there is still something desperately reaching out for God, still hungry for God, a longing, a need for God, which is one of the most powerful expressions of faith anywhere in the scriptures.

Just listen to the Psalms that we often hear on Sundays, the cries of the faithful feeling lost and abandoned by God. And yet those laments are some of the most profound testimonies to faith we will ever hear. Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus encounters people with an imperfect faith, at best. People who don't even know who Jesus really is, and yet they have reached such a point of desperation in their lives that they know they can't do it on their own, and so they each cry out in different ways, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

The opposite of faith in scripture is not doubt, it's indifference. It's when we no longer care enough to question or lament or cry out because we've come to so fully rely on ourselves and our brilliance and our strength and our power that we no longer need God at all. Faith in scripture doesn't begin with certainty. It begins with need, with our need for God and our need for one another. Notice what Thomas does in our gospel today. He can't make sense of what the others are saying. He can't bring himself to believe it, but he doesn't walk away. He doesn't cut himself off. He stays connected to the community that loves him.

We don't hear how often they gathered or what they talked about or what Thomas might have felt during that week, but when Jesus shows up again, Thomas is still there. Still in the room with his friends. And that too is faith, not certainty, but staying close to the people whose faith can carry us when our own falters, because God never intended us to do faith alone. We need each other. We need each other to study us, to encourage us, to hold onto hope for us when we can't hold it ourselves.

I can't tell you how many times in my own moments of doubt when one of you in a small group or in a class or maybe even just a conversation at coffee hour says the exact thing I need to hear when I need it most. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe.” I don't hear that as Jesus trying to shame Thomas for his doubts. I hear it instead as a reminder that the birthplace of faith was never going to be the proof of miracles, but in the experience of relationships. Relationships that are sustained, not by certainty, but by compassion, by mercy, by mutuality and love.

St. Paul says it well I think in his letter to the Galatians, when he reminds us that all the various beliefs about God that we might have, our doctrines, our creeds, our carefully constructed theologies about God, if they're to have any real meaning or purpose, if they are going to point us to anything that truly matters, then they must all eventually be swallowed up by love. Because at the end of the day, as Paul says, nothing else matters, but faith expressing itself in love.

Some time ago I was meeting with somebody who was struggling with their doubts. She was an engineer, analytical, methodical by nature, and she longed for the faith that she saw in others, but she just wasn't feeling it herself. How do you know God is real? she said. So I asked her, have you ever experienced love? Oh yes, she said. Has love ever changed your life? Absolutely. Has love ever caused you to do something you never thought you'd do? Has love ever made you look foolish for someone else? Made you sacrifice, made you put someone else's needs way ahead of your own in ways that astonished and surprised you? Oh, yes, she said with a smile. Well, I said, it seems to me that you have a faith that could move mountains because God is love.

And so regardless of what we might believe or not believe, regardless of the theologies we question or what Bible stories we don't understand, every time we let love shape our life, every time we choose compassion, every time we choose forgiveness over resentment, every time we put someone else's needs above our own, we are living the very faith that we can sometimes doubt.

Our hearts, they have a way of not waiting for our heads. Our hearts will happily practice the grace that our heads can struggle to wrap their minds around, and perhaps always will. And I think that's how it's supposed to be. And perhaps that's one way to answer Gianna's question, which I dodged earlier. Why do we start here? Why do we have to endure such suffering and sadness? Maybe the question isn't why we start here, but how we live here, how we live here, so that this world might more closely resemble the next.

Maybe this life, this ordinary, complicated, beautiful, and sometimes heartbreaking life, maybe this is the place where love is learned, where our need for God is truly discovered, and our doubts become the opening where community is formed and grace slips in. A place where something new can be born within us, a faith beyond mere belief, a faith that trusts our hunger for God more than our ideas about God. A faith whose most reliable, most tangible, most provable expression is and always has been love.

Amen.