

DOING FAITHFUL
Sermon for Easter 2-Jn 20:19-31
LPC, 4/27/14

I was a huge Judy Collins fan in the 70's, and of course loved her recording of "Both Sides Now," which was written by Joni Mitchell. The song is about losing youthful illusions.

The first verse recalls seeing magical shapes in the clouds, the way children do, but concludes that as life goes on, clouds obstruct and prevent more than they reveal. The second verse is about love, recalling the "dizzy, dancing" feeling of falling in love. But for the singer love has become "just another show," where it's important not to "give yourself away." Finally, the singer recalls the highs and lows of life, but still concludes, "It's life's illusions I recall. I really don't know life at all."

The theme of this song is, literally, dis-illusionment. At best it's a wistful coming-of-age story. At worst, it's cynical. Why do I bring it up during this joyous season of Easter? Because of good old Thomas, whose story we hear, as we always do, on the Sunday after Easter.

I put it to you that Thomas is acting as a conscientious and responsible adult who could probably identify with Joni Mitchell's song. Thomas has probably been around the block a few times and knows the cost of idealism. He has at least just seen his beloved teacher, who preached forgiveness and peace, brutally executed for no reasons other than vindictiveness and fear. He, for one, is not going to give his life over to anything without proof. Are we any different?

For that matter, are the other disciples any different? They are cowering in fear and disbelief, not exactly the picture of faithfulness. They aren't giving their lives over to Jesus without proof that he lives, either.

This story is often taken to be a sermon against doubt. This is hardly surprising, since our translation misleadingly has Jesus say, "Do not doubt but believe." But doubt is not really the subject, and doubt is not the worst thing we, as disciples, can do.

Yes, Thomas doubted. Yes, all the disciples doubted. But it's not their doubt that Jesus condemns. It's faithlessness. A more accurate translation of the original Greek is "Do not become faithless but faithful."

Jesus' use of the verb translated "become" is interesting. He seems to be talking about what may happen in the future rather than the doubt that Thomas has already shown in the past. Jesus knows Thomas and the rest are going to be up against some pretty tough situations in the days to come. So Jesus is encouraging the disciples to remain faithful, and to resist the temptation to faithlessness, come what may in the future.

And through the disciples, Jesus encourages us to remain faithful and resist the temptation to faithlessness, come what may in the future.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

The problem is not doubt. Whenever people do something irreversible or life changing, at least a moment of doubt is inevitable.

In every significant decision of my life – marriage, having children, entering seminary, accepting the call to come here to Lawrencefield, returning to seminary for my doctorate – there’s been at least one moment when I asked myself, “What the heck am I doing?”

Doubts are inevitable, especially when one dares to do something without absolute proof that it’s the right decision. And how often do we get proof like that, before the fact? Hardly ever. If we never dared to do things without proof, nothing would happen. Nothing.

To dare, in fact, is to doubt. An unchallenged decision is, in fact, no decision.

We are talking today about deciding for Jesus. To decide for Jesus is to dare much. And to dare is to doubt.

I hope I have established that doubt is not the bogey man here. Jesus is not talking about doubt but faithlessness. That said, how can we avoid faithlessness and become faithful?

In the first place, faithful is not so much something to be as something to do. Being faithful is an act of will, especially when we have emotional qualms or experience doubt. We don’t usually have emotional certitude.

Marriage is an example. People decide to marry while in love, while in the throes of that “dizzy, dancing way you feel” that Joni Mitchell mentioned. The dizzy dancing won’t always be there. There are times in a marriage that feel like the same old-same-old. That is when the marriage takes an act of will. Those are times when the partners do faithful. And it works. They may even have some more dizzy dancing at some point in the future if they do faithful today.

Returning to the song, here’s what doing faithful with clouds would be like. Yes, you now know that clouds are just insubstantial bunches of water vapor, not bunnies or turtles or ice cream castles in the air. But a faithful person never outgrows gazing at the vast beauty of the sky. In fact, is it not more wonderful to ponder what God hath wrought in the heavens than to fit the clouds into storybook illustrations?

We will never know all there is to know about clouds, or love, or life. We will certainly never know all there is to know about Jesus. But we can keep faith. We will never put our own hands in Jesus’ wounds (at least I don’t think we will) but we can do faithful with Jesus. We can do faithful with God’s love and redemption of creation and the eventual inevitable triumph of goodness portended by Jesus’ resurrection.

Yes, we may doubt. But we can do faithful.