

Let's Be Honest

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When I was growing up I had a classmate whose name I will call Richard – and Richard was a pretty smart guy. Some would say he was too smart for his own good. And the reason they would have said it – and I have to admit I was one of them from time to time – was that Richard was that guy in the class who always felt compelled to ask a question. After the teacher had done her best to explain whatever it was to be explained – a math equation, a science problem, an act of Congress, a classic poem – and while most of us were there to robotically copy down our notes hoping to extract the bare minimum out of our class time, i.e. what was going to be on the test – it was our friend Richard who when the teacher asked, “Are there any questions?” it was invariably Richard whose hand would shoot up with a question. And when the hand went up most of us would roll our eyes and murmur to each other – geez, why does he have to ask so many questions. Truth is, about half the time Richard asked a question we were very glad for it – because it was a question we all had but we worried it was a dumb question and we didn’t want to look stupid asking it. But Richard would ask it – and we were usually grateful for the answer. And yet that did not keep us from a certain level of impatience when it came to Richard’s continued query.

We all have, I suspect, a certain threshold for questions.

How many of us have been subjected to the classic line of questioning from a three year old? Daddy, where does a leaf come from? The leaf comes from a tree. And where does the tree come

from? The tree comes from a seed. And where does the seed come from? The seed comes from God? And where does God come from? I don't know, go ask your mother.

We all have a certain threshold for questions.

Some of us may remember the old detective series, *Colombo*, starring Peter Falk – the frumpy, unkempt detective whose appearance suggested a certain lack of sophistication and smarts – except that he kept asking questions. Stupid, persistent questions that tried the patience of both the guilty and non-guilty. Why, why, why do you want to know these things? It was all a part of the puzzle.

Galileo, the seventeenth century astronomer pointed his telescope to the night sky and wondered along, with his predecessor, Copernicus is it possible that the universe is not geocentric? Is it possible that the earth revolves around the sun instead of the sun revolving around the earth? It was a destabilizing question especially for the Church. It was a question that threw too many other things into question. But there Galileo sat in the back of the class with his hand straight up – begging to ask his question. And the answer was, NO, you can't ask the question. They put him under house arrest eventually and condemned his science to heresy. We have a certain threshold when it comes to questions.

So in our story this morning we find Thomas in the back of the class amidst his fellow pupils – Peter, James and John and the like – and everybody seems to get the answer – this answer of the resurrection -- except for brother Thomas. He has his hand in the air. He had missed the session when Jesus arrived and spoke and dispersed the Holy Spirit. He was absent that day. All he knew was that now there was a rather strange rumor going around the classroom that the dead rabbi was alive. That he appeared. That he spoke. That he came and went without benefit of door or window. And up went his hand. It wasn't the first time he was calling something into question. A couple weeks before when the whole mission of the rabbi seemed to be on a suicide course with Jesus insisting on traveling into the hostile territory of Jerusalem – Thomas piped up expressing his doubt and said in

essence – I don't like where this is going – but one for all and all for one – let us go with the rabbi and if one dies we all die.

And then in the waning hours before the cross – Jesus has the disciples together in the upper room and tries to teach them about the Father's house with many rooms and that he goes to prepare a place for them. This is the way he must go. Do you understand? He says. And up goes Thomas' hand. Uh, no actually. I don't understand. And if these guys were honest they'd say the same thing. They'd have their hands up too – if they were courageous enough to ask what might sound like a stupid question. Lord, we don't know where you are going.

And now here they after the crucifixion and burial and there are 10 votes on the jury for the appearance of the risen Jesus – and one vote still in doubt. Unless I see the evidence. Unless I see the punctured hands and pierced side – I will not believe. 10 to 1. Hung jury. Mistrial. Where do we go from here?

And then the gospel writer follows with this next sentence: *A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them.* Thomas the questioner. Thomas the doubter. Thomas who wouldn't take their word for it. Thomas who just couldn't be happy with just accepting what everyone else has said – we are told that he was with them. There was still room for Thomas. There was still room for his questions. There was still room for his doubt. A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them.

Not unlike that time, I suppose, when the twelve of them were out on the water and the wind was kicking and the waves were beating – and there comes Jesus walking on the water. And this time it's Peter who raises his hand and says, "Question! If it's you, bid me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come." And so Peter with all his certainty comes. But the truth is it's not all certainty that he has. He has some uncertainty. He has some questions still to be answered. He has some doubts about these troughs of water lapping at his feet. And sure enough the uncertainty has him sinking. And now Peter really has his hand in the air. Save me!! And so the Gospel writer tells us –

then Jesus caught him. Then Jesus caught him. Caught him with his hand in the air. Then Jesus caught him and said, "You're not as certain as you thought you were, are you? That's OK, get in the boat and join the rest of them. And so there in the boat sits Peter dripping wet – but there was room for the soggy disciple. There was room for the doubt. There was room for the uncertainty.

Because of course the truth is we are not saved by our certainty, are we? We are saved by grace. If there is anything those disciples understood it was that. Lord knows they made a habit of getting a lot of things wrong along the way. There's was a course of mishaps and misunderstandings. Two steps forward and three steps backward. They understood that desperate father when he said to Jesus, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" And if there was any one of them who didn't understand it – who somehow got it in his head that it was his certainty that would win the day – it was the one who was not in that room that day when Jesus appeared again. Judas, the certain one. So certain that his way was the right way.

It's by grace we are saved. And who wrote those words? So said the once certain man – the apostle Paul. So, so certain. No room for doubt for this guy. Who in his previous life, had been so certain that they're wrong and I'm right – that it didn't take much to cross the line to the stoning of Stephen and the arresting and murder of those early Christians. So, so certain. Certainty can get you into a lot of trouble, you know. Oh no, Paul says after getting knocked off his horse by the resurrected Jesus, raising his hand to shield the blinding light – and the risen Jesus reaches down and saves him from his blinded sinking. Oh no, Paul says, believe me, we are saved by grace and not by our certainty.

Many would argue for a thousand different reasons that Abraham Lincoln was our greatest President. And most would point to his unrelenting pursuit of the abolition of slavery as one of his greatest gifts to the country though it came at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. And yet even throughout the war Lincoln still expressed to himself and aloud to others – the doubts of his being right. At one point he found himself speaking to Orville Hickman Browning, Senator from Illinois who was applauding the President for his forthright stand against slavery, to which Lincoln replied:

“Suppose though God is against us in our view on the subject of slavery in this country, and our method of dealing with it?” Browning was shocked to hear the President’s question and was awed to see how even then the President was “thinking deeply of what a higher power than man sought to bring about by the great events then transpiring.”

It is by grace we are saved, and not by our certainty.

So that first century community of Christ assembles resisting the temptation to shrink their number through some false sense of certainty – the disciples make sure that Thomas is included in their fellowship. For none of them, frankly deserves to be there. They have all stumbled and fallen to this place. But it is together through their shared conviction and uncertainty that they wait for the Risen One to appear in his grace. To take their risen hands and pull them from their fears.

We are a mixed bunch aren’t we? We who sit in these pews. We who claim membership in Church of the Palms. We who take on the banner of being Presbyterian. We who embrace the identity of Christian. We are a mixed bunch, to be sure. Thank the good Lord that he does not demand of any of us a doubt-free life to come to this table. Thank the good Lord that raised hands are welcome here. Thank the good Lord that if anything is required – it’s that we’re honest. With the One who invites – with those who are invited – and with ourselves. Lest we forget that it was when those first twelve gathered at table with bread and cup that they were surprised to hear that there was one among them that was soon to betray him. And soon around him were raised twelve hands. Twelve hands with twelve voices that asked with great uncertainty, “Is it I, Lord?” They were just being honest.

It is by grace we are saved.