Rev. Larry B. Bell, Easter, 4/23/17, A-2, John 20:19-31, *Curiosity, Discovery, Honest Struggle*, Westminster

1. Children: So you’ve heard about Easter: Jesus died and came back to life. You might have lots of questions about that. Was Jesus a ghost? Maybe it was a hologram or some kind of a trick? Thomas had those same kinds of questions. Jesus came and answered them. There’s a picture of that on the front cover of the bulletin. He pulled open his clothes and allowed Thomas to check out the wound. Thomas could see for himself it wasn’t a trick. He wasn’t a ghost or a hologram. I wonder what Thomas was feeling when he saw his friend who died, now standing alive in front of him.
2. Thomas was a curious person who wanted to see for himself what others had already seen.  Jesus welcomed Thomas’ questions and ours.  There is no honest question God/Jesus cannot handle. [Carolyn Brown, Worshipping with Children]
3. Scripture: Our reading this morning is in two parts. Scene one takes place on Easter Sunday evening. The disciple Thomas was not there. Scene two takes place one week later. This time, Thomas was there. The Caravaggio portrayal of scene 2 is on the cover of the bulletin. [Read Scripture.]
4. *We encourage curiosity. Discovery. Honest struggling with questions of faith*. These words are part of our welcoming statement. They are in the bulletin every Sunday. They also describe the attitude of the disciple Thomas in our gospel reading.
5. I think Thomas would be at home here in our church. If Presbyterians had patron saints, Thomas might be ours.
6. I like Thomas. He is a kindred soul. He’s a fact-checker and a skeptic. He’s not going to believe something just because you say it’s true. He wants to get to the bottom of it.
7. Caravaggio depicts this moment of discovery in a beautiful, dramatic way: the disciples with their high foreheads and furrowed brows. You can see the wheels turning, as they work through their skepticism.
8. There are no halos in this painting. Just Christ in the flesh, and Thomas, with ripped clothing so well worn it is shiny, and dirt under his fingernails, letting Christ guide his dirty paw into the wound. This is God in the flesh, with real wounds, coming down to where they were, meeting them with their questions and honest struggles.
9. *Honest struggling with questions of faith*. Who wouldn’t? After all resurrections don’t just happen. Once you’re dead, you generally stay dead. So even though the other disciples claimed to see Jesus alive, Thomas was still not ready to believe. He wants to see for himself. He only wants what everyone else has had. He’s a fact checker. Thomas struggled for a whole week with his questions.
10. Jesus did not discourage Thomas from his questions. Christ came to him and gave him what he needed to believe.
11. But strangely enough, some churches discourage the asking of questions. Just believe. Push that doubt under the rug. Just try real hard. Believe the unbelievable.
12. We, on the other hand, encourage questions. Asking questions can help faith to grow. We don’t need to sweep them under the rug. They are there, so we acknowledge them. We deal with them. It is a much healthier way to live.We try to provide a safe place for skepticism, curiosity and honest struggling with questions of faith.
13. This curious, wondering, discovering faith is very much at odds with certain varieties of faith. In those circles, Thomas is a bad example. He is even called “doubting Thomas.”
14. I don’t see it that way. Thomas had an honest question and he followed it through. This was not doubt. This was faith. Doubt would have blown the whole thing off. Doubt would have said, there’s no such thing as a resurrection, end of story. Instead Thomas, in faith, kept seeking the answer. He stayed engaged with his community. He was on a quest to discover the truth and gain his own experience of the risen Lord. Jesus gave him what he needed.
15. Our mothers taught us, *Don’t believe everything you hear.* With age, I am becoming more and more skeptical. We see so much spin and so many con artists trying to win us over, whether it’s telemarketers or politicians or Facebook postings.
16. We resonate with that ancient skeptic, the disciple Thomas.
17. Thomas is representative of later generations of Christians who weren’t there at the beginning yet still insist on our own experience of the risen Christ.
18. In our church, we welcome an honest struggler, like Thomas, who is curious enough to stick his hand in the wound and check it out for himself.
19. Presbyterians and most mainline churches require their ministers to have a masters degree from an accredited seminary. It’s three years of study beyond a bachelor’s degree. Get done with all that and you’ve learned to how to do research, how to think critically and honestly, how to question authority and struggle with faith questions.
20. Before I went to seminary, people used to try to talk me out of it. They tried to tell me I would lose my faith. You’d be better off not going. That was not my experience. My faith changed, but I did not lose it. It became more of a thinking faith. So much of seminary is head oriented. Before seminary, my faith was more feeling oriented. So I was changed by the experience.
21. I discovered a whole new world. People have been thinking about faith issues for a very long time. Books have been written, sermons have been preached, art, music and films have been made about everything having to do with our faith.
22. Seminary wasn’t the end of learning. After all these years, I am still curious, still making new discoveries, still engaged in honest struggle.
23. We never stop learning. There is always more. So I’ve studied in Israel, at Cornell, at the Pastoral Counseling center in Syracuse, etc., etc.
24. Those of us who have struggles with God are in good company. Moses and God had arguments on Mount Sinai. Jonah went the opposite direction when God called him to preach at Nineveh. Even Jesus in the garden prayed three times, *Lord let this cup pass from me.*
25. Or, like Mary Anderson at yesterday’s funeral service, expressing what so many of us feel: *why God, why? So many children are born into this world unwanted and unloved. And here we have two loving parents who want children and this horrible thing happens. Why?*
26. It is in the context of faith that we ask our questions. We are persons of faith living in a community of faith. It is within that faith community that we struggle, we engage, we question.
27. So how do faith questions, honest struggling, curiosity and discovery fit into a life of faith? What is the role of skepticism in our faith? There are different ways to come to faith.
28. Some of us are like the beloved disciple. Faith comes easily. We were raised in the faith, and it’s been with us all our life. We have always believed. We cannot imagine not believing.
29. Many of us, like Thomas, have had to struggle. We have a rationalistic, objective world-view and that makes it hard to believe in a resurrection. So we have questions. We have doubts. We need to see for ourselves. Thomas came to faith one week later than the others. So we might come to faith sometime later in life, after everyone else.
30. *Curiosity, discovery, and honest struggle* help to build faith.
31. Do we have the courage of Thomas to honestly express our skepticism, to stay engaged as we struggle with our questions, even when do not know how it will turn out?
32. Questions deepen our faith and lead us to know our Lord more fully. As we engage the painting, the poem, the scripture, our faith becomes dynamic and real.
33. Let us engage our faith in order that it might grow. Stick our dirty paw in the wound of the risen Christ. Feel around. Investigate. Question. Pray. Struggle. Sing. Discover. Study and discuss. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Also see: Curiosity, a poem by Alastair Reid (did not include in the sermon on 4/23/17)

Curiosity

may have killed the cat; more likely
the cat was just unlucky, or else curious
to see what death was like, having no cause
to go on licking paws, or fathering
litter on litter of kittens, predictably.

Nevertheless, to be curious
is dangerous enough. To distrust
what is always said, what seems
to ask odd questions, interfere in dreams,
leave home, smell rats, have hunches
do not endear cats to those doggy circles
where well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good lunches
are the order of things, and where prevails
much wagging of incurious heads and tails.
Face it. Curiosity
will not cause us to die--
only lack of it will.
Never to want to see
the other side of the hill
or that improbable country
where living is an idyll
(although a probable hell)
would kill us all.
Only the curious
have, if they live, a tale
worth telling at all.

Dogs say cats love too much, are irresponsible,
are changeable, marry too many wives,
desert their children, chill all dinner tables
with tales of their nine lives.
Well, they are lucky. Let them be
nine-lived and contradictory,
curious enough to change, prepared to pay
the cat price, which is to die
and die again and again,
each time with no less pain.
A cat minority of one
is all that can be counted on
to tell the truth. And what cats have to tell
on each return from hell
is this: that dying is what the living do,
that dying is what the loving do,
and that dead dogs are those who do not know
that dying is what, to live, each has to do.