

**“Living the Questions”
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
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Gospel Reading: John 20: 19-31

**The name of the disciple Thomas has become synonymous
with one descriptive word: doubt.**

“Doubting Thomas”

**We even hear that phrase in everyday usage when people say,
‘Don’t be a doubting Thomas’, as though Thomas was somehow less
worthy because he doubted.**

He questioned.

**And yet, today, one of the invitations in current theology is to
“live the questions” rather than seek absolute, once and for all, answers
that can box us in and close our minds and hearts to ongoing revelation
of how the eternal power of love continues to empower us,
and change us, and touch our lives and our world
with resurrection power.**

**I want to return to a topic from last week’s reflections,
because it arises so clearly from our story today...
and that is around the whole topic of belief.**

**In our story, we hear Jesus say to Thomas, ‘Do not doubt, but believe’.
Believe.**

**Does that mean to believe we have to get our 21st century brains around
a bodily resurrection or can we be like Paul who experienced the
resurrection as powerful, rather than a body ???**

**It wasn’t until the 17th century that ‘belief’ came to be understood as
‘intellectual assent’ to a set of propositions.**

**Before that, when people spoke of ‘belief’, they were speaking of belief
meaning ‘love’, to prize something, to hold something dear.
‘Credo’, likewise, was not about declaring what doctrines we believe in,
in an intellectual way but rather, the Latin word ‘credo’ meant
‘I commit myself; I engage myself’.**

**So to believe was to love; to believe was an action of commitment.
To declare our belief, to declare our faith, is to speak about love.**

It's about action.

Religion is about behaving differently, not giving assent to a list of statements we have trouble getting our heads around.

As Karen Armstrong, theologian and historian, says,

“Religious doctrine summons us to action.

We then only begin to understand the doctrines once we have put them into practice.”

It is Karen Armstrong who notes that one of the reasons we have become so caught up with intellectual assent to specific doctrines is that it is not easy to live the core message of all religions, which is to live compassion as summarized by the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule showed up 500 years before Christ in the teachings of Confucius in the phrase,

“Do not do to others what you would not want done to you”, a teaching that has a wide variety of ways of being presented in each of the world religions.

But the core message is the same.

We are called to live compassion, which means we are called to love our enemy and to love and honour the stranger.

All over the world today, there are religious people who prefer to be right rather than compassionate.

But it is compassion that will change this world.

The need to be right takes us into arguments about that which we can't know the answer to, so we are wise to learn and live the questions, to constantly be seeking how and where we see and experience the divine power at work in the world.

A rabbi was once told by a pagan that he would connect to Judaism if the rabbi could share the teachings of the faith while standing on one foot.

The rabbi stood on one foot and declared the Golden rule:

“You shall love our neighbour as yourself.”

What is hateful to you, do not do to others. This is the last.

All the rest is commentary.

It was Augustine who said that every scripture teaching is about charity/compassion, and we must not leave a text until we have found the compassion within it.

Staying with a text and looking for compassion and charity is a good practice for life, for it prepares us to look for a perspective of compassion and charity in all situations of life. Others have said that if there is no compassion then a text is not a valid teaching of religion.

Many have observed that in the past centuries we have become overly focused on the rational, reasonable, logical thought as the primary way to view life, and have lost touch with the balancing perspective of creativity, mystery and compassion. But it need not be either/or. It needs to be balanced. We need both logic and creativity.

I was sent a link to an intriguing talk on the Internet about a brain scientist who had a stroke. During the stroke she was able to observe the process she went through. The startling part in her observations to me was the description of how she was flipping back and forth between her right brain and her left brain. When she was connected to her right brain (the creative side), she knew herself to be one with all creation. She felt an overwhelming sense of compassion and connection to all that is.

She described those moments as being in la-la- land.

When her left brain kicked in, she was totally different. She observed that she needed medical help and tried to stay in her left brain long enough to take the steps to get that help. Once she slipped back to her right brain, her focus was on all that is good and wonderful, rather than on problem solving. As time passed, she realized that in the left brain mode (the rational side of the brain) she saw herself as separate and filled with fear, but in the right brain mode, she saw herself as being one with all creation and filled with love. She realized that, in the right brain mode, she was experiencing what the Buddhists call Nirvana— an experience where you are not connected to ego but to all that is.

It took her years to heal from that stroke, but what was clear to her as a scientist is that we need a balance of both sides of our brain.

**We need the analytical, questioning side of our brain
but we also need the right side of the brain
awakened more fully in our world
so that we can become more fully alive.**

**We need to awaken and give balance to that part of our brain
that fills us with a knowing that
beneath all the struggles of this world there is harmony waiting to be, a
harmony that fills us with knowing that we are one.**

**We need a balance of the left and the right,
a balance of masculine and feminine energies.**

**One way to connect with the right brain is through spiritual practice:
mediation, prayer, singing, stories, repetition of rituals.**

**This doesn't mean we need to leave our rational brain at the door
when we enter into a spiritual community.**

We need both sides, both perspectives of the brain.

**And as we live with the questions raised by our left brain our right
brain can help us to not demand absolute answers,
but to live with the questions.**

**We need to live with them creatively,
constantly open to new understanding.**

**Letting go of the need to be right (which in turn helps us to do more
than just tolerate our neighbour or the stranger)
moves us toward appreciating those who are different from us,
to appreciating the stranger,
appreciating the spiritual path that others walk.**

**Living the questions opens us to constantly dialogue with life
while we hold fast to that which summarizes all religion:
the Golden Rule, living in harmony, living compassion.**

**One of the images we are given in our story today
is that Jesus came and stood amongst his friends
who were huddled behind a locked door, fearful for their lives.
Jesus stood in the midst of the stench of their fear and their debilitating
grief and said to them and to us:**

“Peace be with you.”

And later, he said, “Peace be with you.

**As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
And the writer of the gospel of John uses a symbol,
a metaphor well-known to the Jewish community
of which Jesus and all his followers were a part.
He describes Jesus doing what God had done at the very beginning of
creation in the second creation story in Hebrew scripture,
in the story of Adam and Eve.
Like God in that story, in this story Jesus breathed on them and
filled them with new life.
Jesus filled them with *ruach*,
which in Hebrew is the word for breath and the word for Spirit.**

**That story is told to capture the truth behind the story—
that the Risen Christ enters into the places of our locked doors
where we cower in fear.
We deaden that fear by filling it with things and busyness
that have little eternal consequence.
But in those places of fear and grief and separation
the resurrection can happen again and again.
For the power of the Christ is willing to enter into our lives and breathe
new life, new energy, renewed power into us, which then sends us out.
The Christ comes to draw us out of the tombs of our lives
and our world, to leave behind the fears,
to leave behind our separateness, to enter into the abundance of life.
Then we live boldly and passionately.**

**A young child worked very diligently at memorizing the scripture verse
for the week, which was Jesus’ saying to us, “Lo, I am with you always”.
When her turn came to share her Bible verse for the week,
she stood up tall and spoke boldly.
Her voice was clear, her words were plain, her message was powerful:
Jesus said, “Glow, I am with you always!”
We run out of our tombs, we move out from behind locked doors—
to glow, knowing we’re not alone.**

**This past week, I had an experience that helped me
understand Thomas a bit more,
around how our faith deepens through experiences.
It was the day that I fell on the ice
and was taken by ambulance to the hospital.**

For about an hour and a half, I was alone in the little cubicle.
The tears of pain that had come at first had subsided,
but the pain was still acute.
I decided to do for myself what I often do for others
in difficult moments of life.
I meditated and prayed.
As I led myself through a guided meditation, so that the pain would not
consume all of me, I found myself beginning to relax.
And the pain began to tone down.
So then I did a prayer that felt very strong.
I visualized my knee being filled with light
that streamed down and into it from above.

Not long after, they took me for an x-ray, placing me on that table
where I had to straighten out my leg—which I did.
An hour before, I could not straighten it
because the pain was too intense.
When the doctor saw me a bit later, he told me I had torn the ligament
and it would take several months to heal,
though there was a slight chance I had only stretched it.
Two days after the fall, it became quite evident that healing was
happening very quickly, so I'm thinking I only stretched it.
But...I ask the question:
Did the prayer make a difference?
I don't believe that God literally comes down and rearranges life,
going against nature.
But I do believe that there is a power that is mystery,
a power that brings positive energy to us when we are open to it.

I've spoken with many people over the years about the power of prayer;
people such as Brian McGugan, Paul Marshall,
people who have shared that they have been amazed at the power of
prayer, the power of allowing that positive energy of life
to enter into our lives.
It may not change the final outcome.
People we pray for do still die. But it does change the journey.

As I thought about the power of prayer and what kind of difference it
makes, I thought of that joke of a person
who desperately needed a parking spot and so prayed to God

declaring if God would provide a parking spot close to the building she needed to get to, she'd make an extra large donation to the church. Just then a car, right in front of the door where she needed to go, backed out and drove away—to which she promptly responded, 'Never mind God, I found one for myself'.

Again, I don't think God is a person sitting up there somewhere who rearranges our lives based on Santa Claus type requests. But I have experienced a power in my life and in this world that brings healing and allows us to discover harmony and fills us with a passion for justice... and compassion that has the power to change the world. It's a resurrection power that empowers us to be all we can be.

This quote caught my attention:

'I'm less interested in your beliefs about Easter and far more interested in how your beliefs about Easter make you a more impassioned and inspired human being. Tell me what you ache for and how the story guides your passion. Tell me who or what cause you're willing to bleed for and how the story empowers your activism. Tell me how the Easter story makes you weep for the destruction of the earth (or the breakdown of community, or walls of division within families that suck the life out of family members) and how the Easter story transforms your tears into compassionate action.'

'Allow the story to speak to you in a special way this momentous Easter. God comes to meet you in the time of your darkest despair and beckons you back into the heart of life, out into the light of day.

The stone is rolled away.

Leave any false sense of a separate self in the tomb and rise to the wonder of inter-being.

You are wondrously related to all things.

You need live in fear no longer.

Leave fear and regret in the tomb...and rise to love.'

Remembering that the Risen Christ said, 'Glow for I am with you always!' ...

**Thanks be to God for the amazing story of resurrection power
that is constantly there to empower us to new life.**

May it be so.

Amen.