

Second Sunday of Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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“Why?” It’s a question that parents often get from their preschoolers. One study suggested that preschool children ask their parents an average of 100 questions a day. By middle school, however, they’ve basically stopped asking questions. Research indicates that around age 3, at just about the time reading and writing become prominent, questioning drops off. Why? Great question. One researcher suggests it’s because “in school, we’re rewarded for having the answer, not for asking a good question.”¹

In today’s gospel, questions, not answers, are key to understanding the power of the resurrection. But the story starts a week earlier. It was evening. The disciples are locked up in a house for fear – fear of the Jews. Now, let’s pause here one moment.

Jews. That term is not really descriptive. If you think about it, Jesus was a Jew. The disciples are all Jews. What’s with that word? The gospel of John uses the term “Jews” an unsettling 70 times, compared to the *combined* 16 occurrences in the 3 other gospels. Half of the time John uses the term “Jews” negatively.² We *must* be careful when we toss that term around. After all, John’s gospel has been used to promote Nazi Germany’s anti-Jewish policies.³ And even our namesake, Martin Luther, has deeply anti-Semitic writings based on John, which, by the way, these writings of Luther were renounced by our

¹ <http://amorebeautifulquestion.com/why-do-kids-ask-so-many-questions-but-more-importantly-why-do-they-stop/>

² <http://jdstone.org/cr/files/johnthejews.html>

³ <http://bulletin.equinoxpub.com/2011/11/hitler-religion-and-the-bible/>

denomination.⁴ We should realize here, and in many other places in the gospel of John, that if John were more articulate he would have said that the disciples feared “the religious authorities, who happened to be Jewish.”

We know that the disciples feared more than the Jewish authorities. These disciples were locked up in fear of their families whom they disowned, they were in fear of the religious system that rejected them, and they were probably in fear of themselves who both accepted and followed a guy who is now dead. They saw the empty tomb, but they did not get it. I think that’s comforting to know. As one scholar put it, “The Easter season of alleluias can sometimes seem to leave little room for our doubts, our fears, and our pain. We tend to forget that for the first disciples, there was fear, doubt, pain, and confusion before there was understanding and joy.”⁵ And I think the real reason the disciples were afraid and that it took them so long to respond is because they didn’t understand why Jesus’ resurrection was important. Remember, these same disciples have seen Jesus raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead (Luke 8), they’ve seen him raise the son of a widow from the dead (Luke 7), and they’ve seen him raise Lazarus from the dead (John 11). So what in the world makes Jesus’ resurrection important anyway? It’s just another dead person who came back to life - no biggie. The disciples did not have any motivation to respond to the resurrection until they realized why *this* resurrection was important, until they really *experienced* resurrection themselves.

⁴ <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Jewish-Relations>

⁵ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1991

That's difficult hard to understand. In one TED talk Simon Sinek noted that when motivating people the "why" matters. He said, "people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it." Think about it, Apple and the Wright Brothers "were successful because they were driven by what they believe and by the fact that they had the conviction that they could change the world." On the other hand, Dell and Tivo, he says, "have failed in certain aspects because they didn't sell a purpose." Ultimately, "sell what you believe, let what you do serve as proof of that [belief,] and make people feel invested in your purpose instead of merely impressed by your accomplishments."⁶ I think that's all true for the church and its history. Before the disciples talked about resurrection, before the disciples responded to resurrection, before they even got what resurrection was, first and foremost they needed to believe in resurrection, they needed to feel resurrection, they needed to know why resurrection matters.

It's the need to feel, believe, and understand the importance of resurrection that is central for both Thomas and the other disciples in today's reading. Thomas wanted to put, or more literally from the Greek, he wanted to thrust his fingers into the hands and side of Jesus. It's an interesting request. It's more of an implicit question really. Now here's the thing, Jesus doesn't shut down Thomas' question. Jesus actually invites Thomas to physically experience resurrection. At first thought, it's gross! But then, it's also amazing.

⁶ <http://elitedaily.com/money/the-art-of-inspiring-people-to-action/>

Yet, years of church history haven't revered Thomas for this question, rather they gave him the unfortunate title of "doubting Thomas."

Thomas, though, probably has the most robust faith of all *because* he questions. In the words of one theologian, "unquestioning faith is no faith at all, because it shows a lack of engagement with the divine... Questioning faith requires an element of risk, and more than that a little courage. To ask a question is to risk the answer...'Where there is daring and courage, there is the possibility of failure.' Sometimes we ask questions and receive no answers. Sometimes we ask questions and don't like the answer we receive. These are the risks we take when we honestly engage the divine."⁷ Without asking questions, I'm not sure we can understand the importance of the resurrection. Without asking questions, we become passive receivers of a faith tradition. Without questions, we can completely miss the point of resurrection.

A perfect example of this divine questioning happened when I met with Henry for the baptism class. Henry and I sat with his Dad at his house and we talk a bit about baptism. Hands down, Henry asked me the most difficult questions I've ever been asked in a baptism class. He'd ask me question after question. The main take away was not that I had the answers (because, let's face it, I don't) and it wasn't that his father had all the answers either; rather the central point in our response was that as baptized Christians we ask questions *and* our questions become centered in Christ.

⁷ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-02/april-3-second-sunday-easter>

As Christians we begin to ask the larger questions about what it means to love both God and our neighbor. We begin to look at our whole lives not as separate from our faith but as deeply integrated. So when we walk into a voting booth we wonder: which candidate best supports the radical inclusion and the love of God? When we shop we stop and wonder: who helped make this shirt, who helped pick this apple, and who helped package this box; and were they treated well? We ask: are schoolteachers and students being encouraged, compensated, and treated with dignity and respect? We ask questions about immigration, racism, incarceration, homelessness, sexism, heterosexism, and poverty. We as Christians are an inquisitive people probing deeper, asking questions, and listening for answers. Why do we care? We care because resurrection is about asking questions. Resurrection is about being vulnerable and being willing to ask the foolish question.

Here's the deal, we are foolish to think that every politician has our best interest in mind. We are foolish to think that we can cover up our brokenness with money and success. We are foolish to think that everyone has the best interest for our lives, for our neighborhoods, for our churches, and for our family. We are foolish. Yet I believe in a foolish God who brings resurrection through a bunch of foolish followers. I believe in a foolish guy named Jesus whose belief in love, acceptance, and grace have transformed and continue to transform the world for the better. I believe that our God has made a fool out

of our fears by reminding us that even when it seems like a dead end something new is possible.

Friends, we've got a foolish, questioning faith that propels us into action. Yet, sometimes this action is only possible when we're finally on board. Sometimes a response requires an experienced of resurrection. As one scholar puts it "sometimes faith is like that – it needs the freedom of questions and doubt to really spring forth and take hold. Otherwise, faith might simply be confused with a repetition of creedal formulas, or giving your verbal consent to the faith statements of others. But true, vigorous, vibrant faith comes, I think, from the freedom to question, wonder, and doubt."⁸ After all, Christianity was never meant to be a list of beliefs that one had to check-off to be considered a Christ follower. Christian faith is a mystery to be pondered, Christianity is a love to be shared, and Christianity is response built on deep questions.

Why? Because our God comes to us in the questions, over and over again. Christ came to the apostles, then Christ came again to Thomas, and God will come again, and again, and again like the energizer bunny. But let's get personal; until I took a step back and rejected everything I knew about Christianity, these stories and this faith tradition didn't matter. I needed to really stop and question – I questioned and continued to question everything about this world, I questioned everything I know about God, I questioned everything I know about religion, and I keep on questioning. For I know that until I do the hard work of questioning and coming to see why this is all important, then

⁸ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/03/easter-2-c-blessed-doubt/>

resurrection means nothing. And that's just our human nature. After all, the disciple saw an empty tomb and they sat at home and Thomas questioned. However, like the disciples, at the right moment, after all my pondering, I have those moments where I get it.

And you will too. In that moment you'll get why resurrection matters. You'll get why we bother. You'll get what it means to live a life of faith. Until that moment, know you're not alone, for our God finds a way into the tombs of self-doubt and rolls away the stone. God finds a way beyond every locked door of unjust systems and blows the doors open. God finds you at the bottom of the bottle of beer to remind you that you are loved and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate you from the love of God. So, until that moment when you experience resurrection, ask questions, be like a preschooler and ask "why?" and remember our God is among it all. Amen.