**Ants in the Pants**

Sermon preached by the Rev. William Bell, MD, BCC on
The Second Sunday of Easter, April 12, 2015

This book is written so that you might believe, that Jesus is the Messiah,
The Son of God, and that believing you might have life in his name.
In the name of the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus. Amen.
Frederick Buechner, the great Presbyterian spiritual writer,
Wrote wonderful things about the relation between faith and doubt.
I just wish that my 2nd grade teacher had read some of them.
I was a curious and precocious younger,
In a very traditional and dogmatic, parochial, Catholic School.
Taught by Sr. Leonard, who could, charitably, best be called unkind.
As for me, I was much more interested in “How?” and “Why?”
And Sr. wanted us to memorize “What?” And to be happy with it.
Faith for Sr. is to memorize dogma and ferociously guard it.
So when Sr. tells us this story of Thomas and Jesus.
I raise my hand and ask, “How did Jesus walk through a door?”
A pained look appears on Sr.’s face. I think I irritate Sr. Leonard.
She replies, “Billy, don’t be a doubting Thomas.”
Sister says that to me many times that year.
Being a doubting Thomas means that you do not have faith.
And that you will burn in hell for all eternity. No one wants to be a
doubting Thomas.
Nevertheless, I persist, “Wouldn’t it be easier just to pick the lock?”
And, once more, I earn the privilege of sitting in the desk in the hall.
Exiled for the remainder of the class. And still wanting answers to my
questions.

But as a grownup, I am able to read on my own.
And I find Buechner a most congenial teacher.
If you’re curious, Google “B-u-e-c-h-n-e-r” and “quotes.”
Here are some of the ones that have stuck with me:
Buechner writes, “I want to be true to the experience of truth,
Which always includes the possibility that maybe you’re just kidding
yourself.”
“If there’s no room for doubt, there’s no room for me.”
“We rely on faith to bridge the gap between doubt and belief.”
“Whether your faith is that there is a God, or that there is not a God,
“If you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.
“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”
My favorite Buechner quote is this: “Here is the world.
“Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.”
So, how much easier would it be for Sr. to say,
“I’m not sure, Billy. I’m glad that these stories make you squirm in your pants.
Faith is like having ants in your pants, it keeps your faith awake and moving.”
At least that would have shut me up—I think.

But, let’s get back to our friend Thomas.
The disciples ask him to give up his belief in the reality of death,
To let go of his very real grief and to grab something as flimsy as a Spirit.
Not that any of his buddies could do it. Remember how the story goes.
Mary Magdalene is the first to see but not touch Jesus.
Two men appear to her in the empty tomb,
And she believes that they have stolen the body of Jesus.
Then she asks the gardener where they took the body,
Recognizing Jesus only when he calls her by name.
Then Mary runs and tells the disciples, “Hi guys, I have seen the Lord.”
The disciples respond, “Oh really, Mary?”

Do they believe her? Evidently not!
That same night, we find them locked in that upper room.
Are they partying? Are they rejoicing in the Truth of the Risen Lord?
No! They’re quaking in their boots.
Terrified that the Judeans are going to crucify them, also.
Even when Jesus appears in there midst, they just stand there—terrified to speak.
They might be afraid that Jesus is a ghost come to haunt them.
Especially, after the cowardly way they deserted and denied him.
Only after Jesus gives them his “Peace,”
And shows them the wounds in his hands and side,
Only then do they begin to rejoice. Then Jesus breathes Holy Breath on them,
He sends them out to do what God had sent Jesus to do.
To go out and proclaim God’s forgiveness of sin.
This is the moment when the Glorified and Exalted Lord,
Breathes the Holy Spirit onto the New Humanity. And Thomas misses it.

You have to admire Thomas’ integrity.
His willingness to say exactly what he truly believes.
Remember! He is the one who speaks out!
Remember when Jesus heads out to raise Lazarus?
Thomas speaks the truth: “Let us go too, so that we may die with him.”
Now that is loyalty and courage and trust. Remember Maundy Thursday?
When Jesus talks about preparing a place in his Father’s house?
Thomas speaks for all of them: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going.
How can we know the way?”
So when Thomas comes back dispirited and alone and grieving,
He finds the disciples, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.
I’m sure he’s wandering exactly what Spirits they’ve been drinking.
Or what vapors they’ve been inhaling. He’s probably furious.
“Unless I thrust my hand into his breathing, wounded body,
I am going to be faithful to the Lord’s memory
And I am going to grieve him properly!”

All this sets up that wonderful scene a week later.
On the First Sunday after the Resurrection, in that same upper room,
When Jesus is once again present among them and gives them his Peace.
Here, Jesus looks tenderly on Thomas, and Jesus offers up his body once more,
“Thrust your hand into my side, if that’s what it takes.
Only don’t be unbelieving, but believing.”
And Thomas, once again, speaks utter truth, the full proclamation of faith,
Thomas says to Jesus, “My Lord and My God.”
And then, Jesus turns to us, Looks deeply into each of us and says:
“Blessed are you who have not seen, And yet have come to believe.”

All of John’s Gospel comes down to one core principle.
Jesus came in to the world to save all of us sinners.
To proclaim God’s merciful forgiveness,
And John writes this Gospel so that you might believe,
That Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,
And that believing, you might have life in Jesus’ name.
Life in this world with all its beauty and terror, and eternal life in the world to come.

So do I have doubts? You had better believe it.
Fortunately, I met another Sister in 2004—Margaret Farley.
I’d read a book of hers on Medical Ethics.
This time, I am a postulant for ordination in the Episcopal Church.
My Bishop gives me Yale Divinity School as one of two options.
Two choices of seminaries to attend.
And I want assurance that YDS is a faith-filled place,
And not only an academic place. So I call this wise old woman at Yale.
I ask if I may talk with her when I interview there.
And when we are alone, I ask her, “Is this a faithful place?”
She answers, “Yes, as long as you believe that doubt is part of faith.”


And that is the truth. Doubt is not unbelief. Doubt is a part of true human faith.
You see, faith is courageous trust in an invisible God.
The willingness to stake your life on the ancient story.
A story filled with death and gardens, Of mighty deeds and cold betrayal—
Of an undying hope for reconciliation in the face of rejection.
Believing is the intertwining of our personal stories,
Within a community that sits amidst a cloud of witnesses.
Believing hears a love so pure that it transforms brokenness,
Heals sinfulness, and fills pain with hope.
Hope amidst all the beauty and terror in each human life.

But faith is more than our trust in God’s goodness,
Faith is Christ’s faithfulness to God’s terrible mission for Jesus.
Faith is stronger than our trust in Jesus.
Because faith is the strength of Jesus’ trust in us.
This Jesus who suddenly appears in the midst of the disciples.
Who pursues Thomas and tells him to stick fingers into his wounds.
Who pursues each of us with a love that rises from the dead.
We come to see this Jesus in Word and Sacrament.
We see this Jesus in prayer and meditation.
We see Jesus when he comes to us in form of another person.
And we see Jesus when we see Christ in another person.
We see Jesus when we care for someone, or when someone cares for us.
We see Jesus in the love that raises each of us up—raises us up from sorrow into joy.
A love that will raise us up on that last day—
Raise us up to new life where there is only joy everlasting.
That is one powerful love. Amen.

**John 20:19-31 (CEB)** Jesus appears to the disciples

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”
Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.