

April 3, 2016

Tim Hughes

Sermon: The Architecture of Doubt

The Gospel Lesson: John 20:19-25

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

The twentieth chapter of John begins with a locked room.

It's dark outside. The curtains are drawn. The lights are down low. John says they were hiding away from the mob that had demanded Jesus' death, but of course it was bigger than that. It's easy to forget that Easter was not a triumphant moment for the disciples but rather a bewildering one.

They had hoped. They had *hoped*. They had dared to imagine a world where death was not inevitable. They had imagined a world that was not governed by power-players and state-sponsored terror. They had dared to dream and then they watched those dreams die on the cross.

See - to hope is to open your heart. To hope is to make yourself vulnerable to disappointment. When that disappointment arrived for the disciples, it was crushing. So crushing, in fact, that they couldn't quite dare to believe the stories of the women ran back to them, breathless, with rumors of resurrection. Fool me once, shame on *you*, but fool me twice, shame on *me*. So they withdrew. They hid away. They locked the doors.

If you aren't familiar with that wound-licking, face-saving hiding place, then maybe you've never really had your heart broken.

If we wanted to put it in structural terms, we could call it the architecture of doubt, that place where we retreat to feel safe in the face of uncertainty. It's not giving up, exactly, and it's not a step of faith. It's somewhere in-between – more like a waiting room.

I read a reflection this week by an Anglican priest that challenged the way I think about the empty tomb. He argues that if the cross is the central symbol of Christianity, representing Jesus' death, then surely the

empty tomb is the central symbol of the resurrection, representing Jesus' life. ¹

We were there just last week. "The one you seek is not here!" the men in dazzling white said to Mary and her friends. "He is not here! He is risen!" (Luke 24:5)

Peter needed an even closer look, rushing all the way into the space, marveling at the dark emptiness, the linens crumpled on the ground. (John 20:4)

It's very interesting to me that the initial accounts of the Resurrection are about Jesus' *absence*. The first indication of good news was not the presence of the Risen Lord but the absence of a corpse. For a good long while – a week in this account - the disciples lived in that in-between space between knowing and not knowing.

So I'm not surprised, really, that we gravitate towards the empty tomb as our preferred icon of the Resurrection. So much of our faith life is like a religious CSI Episode – we move through the world with a magnifying glass and a chemistry set, seeking evidence of the Holy. Was Jesus here? How recently? Who witnessed it? We sift through contradictory information, we take testimonies, we seek solid ground on which to plant our feet. All too often, as bad as we want to claim and celebrate the Resurrection, a walking, talking, death-destroying miracle, we hedge our bets a little bit, returning again the empty tomb. It's a safer bet, even on the level of metaphor. It's the architecture of our doubt.

Christ is not here, we say. That we know for sure. But is he risen? We're looking into it. In the meantime, the empty tomb is our in-between place, our safe place.

I don't want you to hear me wrong here. I think that doubt is a feature - not a flaw of our post-modern religious life. Like it or not, we are now living in a world where people are inherently suspicious of certainty

¹ Ned Lunn, "Communities of Doubt," April 28, 2014, www.nedlunn.com/tag/doubtingthomas.

and absolute truth, and with some very good reasons. Really, we are correcting now for centuries of history that valued certainty above everything else.

In many congregations today, the best way to preach Doubting Thomas is to make a case for doubt. To point out Christ's compassion for the disciples and Thomas in particular. To ask people to identify their doubts and like Thomas – to say them out loud. To be patient with them. To ask what their doubts tell them about themselves. This is important work and I'm sure there are many of us who need to do it.

But – we are not “most congregations.” We are Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church. Doubting is what we do best. You might even call it our spiritual gift.

So, I asked myself this week, what is God's word to Brown Memorial in this text? This congregation has long been a home – a refuge – for people who have been burned by the church, people with major questions, people with considerable doubt. It is an honor to be that place. I'm a member of your tribe.

And if this is our in-between place, our waiting room, the architecture of our doubt – isn't it lovely?

It is indeed, and that may be part of the problem. I believe that it is possible to be too comfortable in your certainty. And I also believe that it is possible to be too comfortable in your doubt.

Rachel Held Evans grew up in Dayton, Tennessee. Dayton is a small town with a big history – it was the site of the famous Scopes “Monkey” trial of 1925.

If you need a little brush up on your history, here is the quick and dirty version:

Tennessee passed a law in the 1920's making it illegal to teach the theory of evolution to high school students. There was a fear that telling

children about evolution would introduce doubt into their minds about the authority of the Scriptures.

Three-time Presidential Candidate and lifelong Presbyterian William Jennings Bryan supported the bill, saying, “The Christian parents of the state owe this law a debt of gratitude, for saving their children from the poisonous influence of an unproven hypothesis.”²

Bryan ended up prosecuting the case himself, which turned into a media circus about fundamentalist Christianity, with witnesses being asked questions on the stand like, “Can you explain how Eve was created from a rib?” and “Did Cain have to marry his own sister?” This was the first trial ever broadcast in its entirety on the radio. It was OJ before OJ, if OJ was Charles Darwin.

Scopes was convicted in the end – he did not deny teaching evolution to his students but Christianity lost its trial in the media.

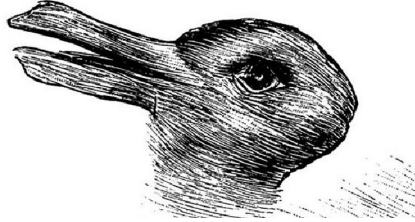
That is Dayton, Tennessee. To be honest with you, it hadn’t changed too much when Rachel Held Evans was born there in 1981. She was the child of a theology professor. She was a conservative Christian evangelical, which is to say she was like almost everyone else.

She went to Bryan College, right in Dayton, named after William Jennings Bryan.³ She writes of her faith in those days, “For most of my life...I interpreted everything that happened around me and within me as acts of God. [God] was the only explanation for how the world came to be, how people managed to be good to one another, how believers had religious experiences, how things always worked together for good, how the Bible spoke to me, how the day after I prayed for this or that, I just happened to receive this or that.”

² “The Scopes Trial,” www.wikipedia.com,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scopes_Trial

³ Held Evans has written an entire memoir about her experience of growing up in Dayton, called “Evolving in Monkey Town.” <http://www.amazon.com/Evolving-Monkey-Town-Answers-Questions/dp/0310293995>

This Christian worldview, she says, was like the duck that you have printed on the front of your bulletin. The duck was her guide. The duck explained all.



And then, one day, she saw the rabbit. “It happened rather suddenly and it startled me,” she writes. “In one shocking moment, just as clearly as I could see the duck, I could see another pattern that explained the world: chance, wishful thinking, self-delusion, self-centeredness, superstition, fear, projection, science, psychology, coincidence, power plays, politics.”

If you haven’t already realized it, the image on your bulletin is an illusion, a double image. It can be read, left to right, as a duck. Most people see the duck first. But it can also be read, right to left, as a rabbit. The duck’s beak becomes the rabbit’s ears.

Here’s the key insight from Held Evans, I think, “It’s not that I stopped seeing the duck,” she says. “It’s just that once I saw the rabbit, the picture made sense both ways.”⁴

I love that double image as a metaphor for the life of faith and doubt. We read the world constantly through multiple, contradictory lenses. It’s the reason why our CSI-style investigations always seem to fall short of proving the Holy. It’s the reason you can’t prosecute yourself towards a deeper understanding of God or build a child’s faith by repressing their questions. The evidence that points us *towards* God is the same evidence that points us *away* from God. The life story that has

⁴ “Why Can’t You Just Have More Faith?” by Rachel Held Evans, September 28, 2010, www.rachelheldevans.com.

brought you joy and friendship has also delivered you pain and disappointment. It's hardly a zero sum game.

The duck and the rabbit are the same drawing. It's not a matter of choosing the right one. It's a matter of learning to live with double-vision. It's a matter of leaning into mystery.

Which brings us back to Thomas. I really enjoy that Thomas also went by the nickname of Didymus, or the Twin. Did he have a twin? Who knows? The Bible doesn't say. But I like to think of Thomas the Twin struggling with this double vision.

Let's be clear – this is just me having fun with the text. But Thomas had known Jesus for years. He had seen the miracles in person. He was right there at the table for the last supper. He had heard Jesus – at least three times – describe his own imminent death and resurrection.

Thomas had a good long look at Jesus. Better than any of us. He already had faith – he had left behind everything to follow him. And yet – he still couldn't help but see the rabbit. He still found himself undone with fear and disappointment and doubt when he couldn't see Jesus with his own eyes.

When he was confronted with that dilemma, he did two things that I think are familiar to a lot of us. He demanded more compelling evidence and he locked himself away. He retreated into the architecture of his doubt.

In the end, Jesus does show up for Thomas. He does offer up his wounds for Thomas to inspect. Interestingly, though, the text doesn't mention whether Thomas ever actually takes him up on the offer. I would like to think that once he set eyes on Jesus' face, it seemed a crude and irrelevant request.

So what is the word today for Brown Memorial? Do we need to cease our doubting ways? Do we need to find a new spiritual gift?

I don't think so. Doubt is an integral part of our spirituality and we are right to embrace it and explore it. We don't need to be ashamed and we don't need to pretend to be certain. In fact, *please stop* pretending to be certain. It's very annoying. But doubt should also never be our end-game. It can become it's own form of paralysis. Jesus didn't vacate the empty tomb so that we can take up permanent residence there. Jesus is calling us to step out in faith. "As the Father has sent me," he said, "so I send you." That's an invitation we'll never be fully ready for. And Jesus asks us to do it anyway. I guess to the extent that we find that scary, it's the bad news.

But there is also good news. It's packed concisely into the very first verse of our reading today. "When it was evening on that first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples were hiding were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'." (20:19)

We think of John 3:16 as the encapsulation of the Gospel but I'd also offer up John 20:19.

Jesus was gone, the disciples were heartbroken, and they locked themselves away. But the architecture of their doubt did not stop Jesus from coming and standing among them.

See, this is not the story of the triumph of faithful people. This is not the story of monks in the desert who, upon their 30th consecutive hour of prayer, began to levitate.

This is not the story of Mother Theresa, dedicating her entire life to the lepers of Calcutta.

This is the story where a bunch of guys who, when it comes down to it, are too scared to believe in Jesus and Jesus shows up anyway, not to wrap their faithless knuckles with rulers, but to hold up his own scarred palms and say, "Peace be with you."

And here is the crazy thing: the text seems to suggest that it was not the evidence that swayed them. It was not Exhibit A – Jesus’ beating heart – that closed the case for them. No, it was his wounds.

Verse 20: “After this, he showed them his hands and his side, and the disciples rejoiced to see the Lord.” It was his woundedness that showed them that the promises of the Gospel are true. It was his love.

Thomas gets a bad rap – we call him Doubting Thomas. But the Christian tradition holds that he traveled from Israel to India, talking about Jesus with anyone that would listen. The tradition says that he died a martyrs’ death, demonstrating both bravery and love until the end of his life.

I think we fool ourselves to paint Thomas as a man who stopped doubting the day Jesus invited him to touch the wounds. That’s just a retreat into more binary thinking about doubt and certainty. It’s not helpful.

I think its much more reasonable to think of him as a human being like ourselves. Someone who learned to embrace double vision. Someone who learned that our life is both joy and pain and that it’s very hard to have one without the other. Someone who took that knowledge, scary as it is, and opened the doors of his heart, once again, trusting that he would be accompanied in that place by another.

Trusting that when he did finally find the courage to hold out his hand, it would be grasped by another scarred palm.