"Doubt and Defiance"
by Vince Amlin
John 20:24-29
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United Church of Gainesville

The sermon title this morning comes from a pair of plays by John Patrick Shanley. *Doubt* is the Pulitzer Prize-winning play which became a movie starring Meryl Streep and Phillip Seymour Hoffman. *Defiance* followed it as the second play in what is intended as a trilogy, chronicling changes in American society over the lifetime of the author. It played last month at the Hippodrome, and I got to see it with some of my fellow UCGers as part of the Drama and Dessert small group.

The story of *Doubt* focuses on accusations of abuse against a priest working in a Catholic school. While the young priest, Father Flynn, maintains his innocence, the grim principal, Sister Aloysius is sure of his guilt and works to expose him. The play ends without resolving the question of Father Flynn's guilt, and the audience is left in a position of radical doubt, not simply uncertainty, but irresolvable mystery. The play is, after all, a play; the characters do not exist outside the script; there is no answer key available. The discomfort that such doubt causes is immediately apparent from audience reactions after the show. Everyone moves to answer the question, "Did he do it?" But there is no answer, and such questions miss the power of the play which consists of sitting in that tension, that doubt.

One reading of the play understands it as a dramatization of the cultural shift between modernism and postmodernism, illustrating the lack of certainty, the lack of objective truth which marks our postmodern life. We live in a world in which the institutions that once provided a feeling of certainty and absoluteness have been relativized: Church and Country, the Nuclear Family, Reason and Rationality, all have been thrown into question. We live in a world in which every truth claim can and must elicit questions about the secret workings of power it obscures, about those for whom it is true and in what ways it may be false. We live in an era in which certainty is an ill-afforded luxury.

The Church has generally reacted to this new doubtful world in one of two ways. On one hand, there are those churches which set themselves against doubt, which understand doubt as an enemy to be conquered or pretend that such doubt does not exist. On the other hand, there are churches who have become wholly enamored with doubt, so much so that they can find nowhere to stand, no way to believe. There are pro-doubt churches, and there are pro-certainty churches, and this morning's scripture brings out the character of each congregation. This passage is the lectionary passage for the day, which means that ministers all over the country will be preaching about Thomas today. In many congregations, a preacher is excoriating Thomas and the congregation for their doubt, repeating again and again the words, "Do not doubt, but believe!" In many other congregations, a pastor is sympathizing with Thomas, identifying with him, talking about how many good reasons there are to doubt, and how God blesses us because of Thomas' doubting.

The play *Defiance* picks up where *Doubt* leaves off, not with the same characters or story, but in a country beset by doubt, in the midst of the Vietnam War. The events of

the 60s have thrown all certainties into question, and in the two characters from this morning's reading, we see the two responses: pro-certainty and pro-doubt. On one hand, the Chaplain seems almost unaware of such doubt. He believes in law and order, right and wrong, believes in a melodramatic world, "good and evil in a struggle to prevail." He is certainly pro-certainty, and at first blush, it seems the Captain is as well. He is a military man, doing his duty and following orders. But the Chaplain understands that this is simply a cover, that the Captain has been so overcome by doubt that he is unable to move, and uses the military to make decisions for him. He feels unqualified to make any judgment, but instead wants to have no impact, to leave no footprint, "as if he had never existed." The Chaplain's suspicions are confirmed in a later scene when the Captain is talking to his commanding officer who asks him:

Why do you serve?
Got to do something
What's your purpose?
To get through the day!
Come on, Captain! You're not a machine!
Might as well be
Who are you?
Nobody!
You must have a dream!
No sir! My dream was shot down in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968.

Captain King has been plunged into doubt, plunged into uncertainty, and it leaves him frozen. He wants desperately not to act or to decide because he has no idea in which direction to move. But the other characters will not allow him to shirk his responsibility. His commanding officer responds, "Captain, Martin Luther King's death does not give you permission to lead a cynical life." Life itself will not allow the Captain to leave no footprint. His actions and their consequences drive the play, even when he tries to keep them from doing so. And in the end, he defies doubt. Though he has little to stand on and nothing to hold to, he acts on his beliefs. He steps out and does that in which he believes because doubt or no, he can no longer afford inaction.

I see Jesus asking something similar of Thomas. As I said earlier, this passage divides churches into pro-doubt and pro-certainty camps, but is that really what it is about? Instead, in this passage, I hear Jesus rejecting both doubt and certainty in favor of something called belief. The quote, "Do not doubt, but believe" is often pulled out to suggest that doubt and belief are opposites, but in Jesus' final words it is not doubt for which he chastises Thomas, but the need for certainty. "Do you believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and who yet believe." Jesus rejects the notion that certainty is needed for belief.

Doubt and certainty turn out to be two sides of the same coin, and belief is different than either. That's because the belief that Jesus is talking about is not the belief of intellectual assent or scientific evidence as so often is assumed. Instead, he is talking about the belief of trust, commitment, relationship. It is a little confusing because in the Greek they are actually two different words, but the easiest way to understand it in English is the difference between a "belief that" and a "belief in."

To "believe that" something is the case means to agree intellectually. I believe that the Earth is round. I believe that today is Sunday, and I can marshal evidence and

arguments to support that belief. But when we say we “believe in” something or someone, it has a different meaning. If I say, “I believe in justice,” or, “I believe in Sam and Mark,” I am no longer talking about a question of fact or proof. I am not saying I believe Sam and Mark exist (although I do). I am saying something about my relationship with them, my trust in them, my commitment to them. “I believe in you.” This is the word that Jesus uses when he is talking to Thomas- not, “believe that I am Jesus,” “believe that I have been brought back from the dead,” or “believe in doctrines of the Church.” But, “believe in me, in my life and in my teachings; trust me; believe in resurrection; believe in new life.” In the Greek this “believe” is used to ratify treaties or to describe the relationship between spouses. “Believe in me.” He is not asking for Thomas to think something; he is asking for Thomas to be something.

This is a meaning of belief which desperately needs to be recovered in our time. We live in an era and in a country in which religious and theological thought in the public square are at an all-time low- not in quantity, but in quality. This is largely because the question of faith or of religion has been boiled down to a “believe that” debate. Do you believe that God exists? Do you believe that Mohammed is his prophet? Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah? It pains me to look through the Religion section at big bookstores. It is nearly impossible to find religious classics from any tradition in these bookstores. Instead, the shelves are crammed with books from one side or another, arguing for readers to “believe that” whatever the author is claiming, is true. Gallons of ink are spilled and mountains of money spent over intellectual debates which, according to this morning’s passage, are largely beside the point. No matter how one answers those “believe that” questions, these authors are asking precious little of one’s life. “Belief that” requires only one’s mind, only one’s intellect. This is why those books are so popular and why it is so easy to be an adherent of a religion, or a non-adherent for that matter, but a lot harder to be a practitioner. The question that Jesus asks is the harder question and the better question because it calls forth action even in the midst of doubt. “What will you believe in? What will you commit to? What will you live for?”

It is the answers to these questions which structure our spiritual lives and upon which our hope must be founded. This is ultimately what the resurrection is about- hope. As postmodern people we must ask, “How do we hope in the midst of such doubt.” “Beliefs that” are easily shaken, they depend upon proof and evidence. To “believe that” resurrection is possible, as Thomas does, only when one has evidence, when one experiences resurrection is fine for the good times, but I know from my own experiences of resurrection that new life is ephemeral. It does not last. One minute the sun is shining, goodness is real, and all things are possible; and the next the clouds begin to gather, despair draws near, and that sunshine can seem a dream, an apparition, a lie. It is a peculiarity of the human condition that we can be so easily convinced that everything outside the present moment has been an illusion. Like ancient people, fearing that the Sun may not rise tomorrow, or like the tragic stories of high schoolers who kill themselves because life seems to have nothing to offer beyond the present torment. When our hope is founded on the things we can see, and hear, and taste and smell it is easily shaken because bad things do happen. And hope that can be shaken is no hope at all, for the most important quality of hope is that it be present at the moment when hope seems most absurd.

Jesus invites Thomas to found his hope on a “belief in,” a trust, a “commitment to” which goes beyond what he knows for certain, which is capable of coexisting with his doubts. To believe in someone, to commit to them as to a spouse, does not depend simply upon what one can see, or hear, or touch. If that were the case, every time one saw, or heard, or touched something which caused them to doubt, the relationship would be dissolved. Instead, the commitment to “believe in” someone or something, is one which transcends evidence, defies evidence, defies the ins and outs and ups and downs of our existence. And thus it is capable of withstanding. This is the belief upon which resurrection hope is founded, not a “belief that” physical resurrection is possible and takes place in such and such a way, but a persistent, a defiant “belief in” new life, in rebirth, in the God through whom all things are possible. A “belief in” these things not because they can be proven with the mind, but because one is committed to them, true or false, within one’s heart.