

AN INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP:
“FOLLOW YOUR QUESTIONS”

John 20:24-29

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Why? Why? Why? Why? - Once more Americans are asking why? Why should thirty-two people lose their lives in a shooting rampage on Virginia Tech campus? Inquiring minds want to know why. You would think after the Oklahoma City bombings, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the high school shootings in Texas, Colorado, and Kentucky, we would eventually become too numb to notice. But something inside the human spirit will not let us off that easy. So people with little, if any, religious faith are gathering this week in churches and prayer circles with one question on their minds. That question is why?

It would be easy for us religious people to be cynical toward those of little faith who only want to talk to God in times of crisis! Where are the marginal when the risen Christ makes his presence known? People have been raising that question about the disciple Thomas for over two millennia. Where was Thomas when the risen Christ appeared to the disciples? What right has he to be so timid about belief and so doubtful of his friends? We call him Doubting Thomas - but the Bible never uses that term - and Jesus circles back a week later to make a personal resurrection appearance to relieve his doubts. So, in defense of Thomas, I would like to say there may be more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds.

IT IS HUMAN NATURE TO SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

The disciples exclaim, “*We have seen the Lord.*” Thomas responds, “*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe!*” (John 20:25)

Last week we witnessed a great outpouring of faith expressed by nearly 110 young people. These confirmands were expressing what John Westerhoff called “affiliative faith.” They came to personally affirm their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is the faith embraced by their parents and taught by many of you in this church. Never underestimate affiliative faith.

As these young people progress in their spiritual journey they will inevitably enter another stage of faith development. This is what Westerhoff called “searching faith.” In this natural period of life, from late adolescence through young adulthood, people want to know How? Why? How come? When? What if? You know the questions: How old is the earth? How big was the whale that swallowed Jonah? Why did Jesus appear only to his own? What is life really like on the other side?

Seek the answers, but do not be obsessed by the questions. Kierkegaard once said, “Christians are like school boys who want to look up the answers to their

math problems in the back of the book rather than work them through” and learn from the process. By age forty, we want everything to fit together. We seek the quick fix, the self-help handbook, the Cliff Notes of life, and become ever more demanding that we find the final answer. Sorry. Life does not work that way.

MATURE CHRISTIANS LEARN TO LIVE WITH THE QUESTIONS

What are the questions that continue? Let me mention the five whys I hear most often.

Why do people suffer? The question is as old as Job and as current as Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote his famous book When Bad Things Happen to Good People out of his own pain of losing a child. According to the polls, it is the number one question people would like to ask God. Well, wouldn't we all? I do not know why a good God who is Almighty and Omnipotent tolerates a world full of starving children, natural disasters, and debilitating disease. I have some theories, but I do not know.

Why is this happening to me? Not long ago a Comair flight leaving the Lexington, Kentucky Airport crashed at the end of the runway, killing all thirty-eight passengers. A friend of ours was scheduled to be on that flight. At the last moment she changed her plans and took another flight. We all thanked God for his intervention. In my soul I had to ask, what about the other thirty-eight? Did they miss God's message? Were they living outside of God's favor? If one was miraculously saved, why did the others perish?

Why does evil prosper? It is one of the psalmists' favorite complaints. Psalm 73:12 says, *“This is what the wicked are like, always carefree, constantly increasing in wealth.”* He was in his mid-forties when he popped the question to me, his pastor. “Howard, I just want to know why people who cheat on their expense accounts, take advantage of their customers, and don't worry about being faithful to their wives make more money than I do when I try to live by the Christian values?” How does one answer that?

Why is God so silent? C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic book A Grief Observed, “Why is it that when you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing God, you will be - or so it feels - welcomed with open arms. But go to God when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside, after that, silence!” Some of you know exactly what Lewis meant.

Why should I believe in the Resurrection of the Dead? Of course we can identify with Thomas here. It takes a stretch for human minds to embrace immortality. Paul said, *“If Christ has not been raised from the dead, our preaching is useless and your faith is futile. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others.”* It is not about human bones and ancient ossuaries that bear the name of Jesus. It is about winning the war over death. It is about tears being wiped dry. It is about knowing everlasting peace.

FAITH IS THE COURAGE TO CARRY ON

Life is not a riddle to be solved, but a relationship to be lived. When Jesus came and Thomas saw, he exclaimed, “*My Lord and my God!*” When Jesus comes, the questions do not matter as much any more. When Jesus comes, our faith is no longer an academic discussion, but an intimate trust in our living Lord. When Jesus comes, he takes the gloom, and fills my life with glory, for all is changed when Jesus comes to stay.

Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark. Sometimes we wish we could be free as a bird. Do birds really have it made? They toil each day to find food for themselves and their offspring. They never know what a day may hold, whether it will be full of sunshine or cloudy and cold. Birds suffer at the hands of cruel boys and thoughtless developers who destroy their houses without the thought of providing them another place to live. Maybe birds do not have it made after all. But they do keep on singing.

My friend Doris Jones defines spousal death as amputation without anesthesia. She says the death of a much loved spouse calls into question all the certainties of life and death. From her own experience of losing her husband and countless years of counseling others through life’s losses, she has written a book and given it this title: [And Not One Bird Stopped Singing](#).

Faith is the courage to believe, where we have not seen. Jesus says to Thomas, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*”

Some faith is born of certainty. God shows up in mysterious ways and we are filled with wonder. He plows through our doubts and leaves us full of belief. In moments like these we see and feel and touch and experience for ourselves the power of the Resurrection. Our hearts become full of celebration.

Other times faith is a matter of fidelity. Fidelity faith is the faith Jesus expressed on the Cross as he wondered why his Father had forsaken him. Fidelity faith is expressed in the words of Paul when he asks the Lord three times to remove his thorn in the flesh. Fidelity faith is found in fellow strugglers who never give up, who never give up, who never give up when they can find no good reason to carry on.

So, who has greater faith? Those who experience a miracle and live to tell about it? Or those who never experience a miracle or any other favors from God, but keep on believing anyway?

Doubt sees the obstacles,
Faith sees they way!
Doubt sees the darkest night,
Faith sees the day!
Doubt dreads to take a step,
Faith soars on high!
Doubt questions, “Who believes?”
Faith answers: “I!”
Amen.

