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My Unbelief

Acts 1: 3-5, 12-14 | John 20: 19-31

I saw a short video clip last week about the war in Ukraine. I don't remember where exactly I saw it. Maybe you saw it too. It was a painful video to watch. I'm sure you know that the besieged city of Mariupol is a strategic port city in southern Ukraine, and it's been the site of particularly fierce fighting because Russia needs it to connect its forces in the East to Crimea in the south. This video featured a soldier describing the desperate circumstances at the steel mill where the remaining battalions of Ukrainian soldiers were making their last stand, along with apparently a significant number of civilians who had sought refuge there. The soldier in the video addressed the camera directly, pleading for extraction by allied military forces. It was a powerful, heartbreaking, and urgent message.

I mention it this morning because even as I felt a strong emotional response to the message of the video, I had a sort of divided mind about the media and the platform itself. It was such a direct and factual description of the situation. But a piece of me wondered - How do I know that it is true? How can I be sure that this soldier is who he says he is and that this video is authentic? Because of the additional reporting I had read about the siege of Mariupol, there was no reason for me to suspect that the account of this soldier was false. But I am suspicious of so much of what I see online because of the digital distance and I am wary of being deceived. Even pieces of media content and coverage that seem very credible and powerful I tend to question and examine. When I know what pain and suffering is caused by this war, it does not feel good for me to have doubts about the accounts

that I read and hear. It feels callous to ask for verification of heartbreaking events. And of course, I know the moral risks of not believing what we are told. Great atrocities are enabled by popular disbelief of apparent evil. We live in denial of what we do not wish to face. What I felt watching that heartbreaking video was not denial. I accepted that it was true, but I hoped that it was not. And I prayed - if it's true, how can it be?

I offer this story from my personal experience to express my sympathies with Doubting Thomas. Told a bewildering and even troubling story about the resurrection of Jesus, Thomas asks for verification. "We have seen the Messiah," exclaim some other disciples. Thomas replies that he would like to see for himself the mark of the nails in Jesus's hands and to touch the wound in his side. He is asking for no more proof of Jesus's resurrection than the other disciples have experienced. Why should they expect him to accept their word of such a strange and confusing turn of events. And if Jesus were in fact risen from the grave, would Thomas not wish to see him - not only to confirm the truth but to be reunited with his friend? Jesus's own words are hard on Thomas. "Was it because you have seen me that you believed? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed."

Easy for Jesus to say. Before judging Thomas too harshly it would be best for us to remove the log from our own eye first. I, for one, am full of doubts not just about Jesus but also much smaller and more verifiable mysteries like videos I see on digital media. If I have suspicions about smaller mysteries, what makes me think I'd be any more courageous than Thomas upon receiving news that Jesus was risen?

I also think it's worth pointing out that none of the disciples closely profiled in the scenes before and after the crucifixion stand out for believing without seeing. Jesus had appeared to the other disciples when Thomas was not there. Somehow

the tradition has convinced us that Thomas was uniquely boorish and thickheaded about the resurrection of Jesus, but none of the disciples who receive a close portrait in the gospels looks very faithful or virtuous. Peter is portrayed as denying Jesus three times. Judas is blamed for turning Jesus over to the Romans. Now Thomas is scapegoated for having little faith. Three of the twelve are profiled unflatteringly. Twenty-five percent is a fairly large sample size. In other words, what I'm saying is - it stands to reason that all of the disciples have let Jesus down in some way. Thomas wasn't uniquely faithless; he was living with the same uncertainties as his peers and without some of the same advantages.

Let me put it this way. The Gospel does not make a virtue out of "blind faith." The gospel is not as Karl Marx said about religion - an opium for the people - to pacify our anxieties. The Gospel says nothing to make of us dumb and passive sheep merely following where we are led. Despite the words of Jesus about believing without seeing, the Gospel of John paints for us a portrait of Thomas - engaging critically, asking questions, testing what he has been told. But Jesus knows not all things can be verified. We accept stories as they are passed on to us, facts as they are given to us, events as they are related to us.

And then there is the simple truth that our critical nature is not always in service to our wellbeing. Our suspicious attitudes are not in service to building community. Our resistance is not in service to finding peace. There would be something very selfish and arrogant for such limited and finite creatures as we are to rely only on those things which we could verify. It would be to make an idol of our investigations.

The words of Jesus to Thomas are not meant to shame his faithlessness. He means only to affirm and declare "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." That must take a lot of faith. Blessed are those who trust power beyond themselves.

What a great act of faith. Blessed are those who accept the truth as it is told. What tremendous faith that must involve.