

The Integrity of Faith

sermon digest

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John 20:19-31

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She is known as the “runaway nun.” In 1962 at the age of seventeen she entered the convent on a quest to find God.

Very soon I would become a wise and enlightened woman, all passion spent. God would no longer be a remote, shadowy reality but a vibrant presence in my life. I would see him wherever I looked, and I myself would be transfigured. . . . I would be serene, joyful, inspired, and inspiring—perhaps even a saint [The Spiral Staircase, viii].

She would leave the convent seven years later, having suffered “a mild breakdown, obscurely broken and damaged”—a condition which, she observes, was no one’s fault, although she blamed herself.

A brilliant mind, she threw herself into studies at Oxford, completed a baccalaureate degree and assumed a teaching post and began doctoral study. Three years later an outside reader, to the Oxford faculty’s dismay, failed her dissertation, thereby costing her a degree and her teaching post. The following six years she served as head of the English department in a girls’ school during which she was diagnosed with epilepsy. Finally she could put a name on the terror that periodically overtook her life. Complications from the epilepsy interfered with her job; and she was nicely asked to leave.

Her life, she acknowledges, was “a catastrophe.” She was suicidal. She went through the horrors of periods of institutionalization and the experimentation necessary to treating her condition with meditation. “Wearied” by religion and “worn out by years of struggle,” she became an atheist. She was able to return to some appreciation for religion only after a moving encounter with Judaism and Islam, and she moved from atheist to “freelance monotheist.”

Karen Armstrong’s hard won appreciation for the gifts of religion and her passion for theology and the study of religion has gifted the world with critical insight. She is recognized world wide as a bridge builder in an age of globalization when such bridges may well be the key to our survival. Given her own religious experience, however, and the vantage point from which she has been allowed to view religion at its best and worst, she is not uncritical. Having herself been damaged by a dogmatism that ran roughshod over people’s sensitivities and having observed the brutality of which religious zeal is capable, she carries a profound suspicion of a certitude that makes people “heartless, cruel, and inhuman,” closing “their minds to new possibilities” and making them “complacent and pleased with themselves.” In such configurations, she says, God morphs into little more than George Orwell’s Big Brother, more worthy of resistance than praise [Spiral Staircase, 204-205].

How many people in our world and how many of us sitting in this room have felt battered by religion? If we are honest, we may even acknowledge some sense of hesitancy in giving expression to our faith in public circles lest we be confused with the militants that exist, not just in other religions, but also in our own. How do we give ourselves to a faith commitment that gathers up all of life’s questions and experiences and is faithful still?

Faith does not come in one-size-fits-all. As the Gospel of John tells it, the day had begun in darkness. “While it was still dark,” Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and discovered there the dawning light of Easter. The day, however, had progressed—or regressed—and in the failing light of evening, the disciples slid into the shadows of uncertainty and fear. Sequestered in the upper room, they had locked the doors of the house “for fear of the Jews.” Jesus came and stood among them, breathing peace and commissioning them to take up his unfinished work.

Preachers have waxed long and hard on the pitiful state of these timid, fearful disciples, especially Thomas—*Doubting* Thomas. “Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Refusing to take the word of the other disciples who had been present on that first evening, Thomas spent an entire week demanding proof. How could he?

Focusing on Thomas’s ineptitude, we fail to take account of a significant point in John’s story. Not just Thomas, but each of the disciples find their way to the resurrection with some difficulty. Mary Magdalene’s initial despair at the empty tomb is turned aside only when Jesus speaks her name. The “disciple whom Jesus loved” needed only an empty tomb. He “saw and believed.” Simon Peter, gathered with the other disciples in the upper room at the end of the day, saw Jesus’ hands and sides and rejoiced. The light of resurrection dawned at different times and in different ways according to the personalities and needs of the beholders.

Not just in the experience of the resurrection, but throughout John’s Gospel, faith appears in a wide variety of expressions. Faith may be a response to signs, or it may not need signs at all. Faith may be weak, or it may be strong. It may be growing, or it may be faltering. Equally important, for John faith is not a decision that is made once and for all, but a decision that must be made anew in every situation. Thus, this Peter who denies his Lord, is extended the opportunity to act on faith again; and Thomas, the disciple, lauded earlier for his insightful questions and stand of courage is welcomed to take yet one more step of faith.

God in Christ invites us to faith in the midst of our lives and questions, not outside of them. If we place

Jesus at the center of the story in the upper room rather than the foibles of Thomas and the disciples, we encounter a story that is full of hope and promise. Jesus meets each of the disciples in terms of where they are, not where they ought to be. He does not come judging. He does not reprimand them for their little faith. He extends himself to meet their need. He speaks Mary's name. He shows his hands and side to the ten disciples that Easter night and then again to Thomas a week later. And his words of grace extend even to us: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Far from having to distance ourselves from the questions of life, far from having to feel guilty that we were not born into a full blown, perfect faith, far from having to feel guilty for who we are and what we are not, we encounter in this Christ a God of grace who invites us still. Rather than hiding in the shadows from one who will condemn us we gather up our questions, our weaknesses, our hopes and aspirations and trust them in the service of one who breathes peace in the midst of turmoil.

Noting the Western tendency to equate faith with accepting intellectual propositions about God, Karen Armstrong [*Spiral Staircase*, 292-293] underscores the earlier interpretation of faith as a conviction that life has ultimate meaning and value in spite of tragic indications to the contrary. The Middle English word *beleven*, she observes, originally meant "to love"; and the Latin *credo* ("I believe") probably derived from *cor do*: "I give my heart." Or, in the words of Anselm of Canterbury: "*Credo ut intellegam*," translated "I believe in order that I may understand."

"Does that mean," she asks, "that we can believe anything?" No. The test of religious thinking that spans the great faiths is the test of practical compassion. The litmus test of every tenet of doctrinal thinking is finally, Does it make you a more empathetic, caring human being, who is hereby propelled into practical acts of kindness? How fitting for a faith that would emulate the kindness and goodness of one whose grace invites our questions and breathes peace still.