

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight Oh Lord our strength and our redeemer.

As I prepared to speak to you this morning and contemplated the readings and thought of the notions of doubt and faith that we are lucky enough to see from Thomas, I kept returning to the fences on our farm. Particularly I thought of our fences that held our hogs. And just to be clear, anytime you find a hog where they are not supposed to be, it is a problem. They upend rose bushes, mow down plants, and root up bulbs while they are on their way to causing trouble...

As a result, we kept our hogs behind an electric fence. Now for those of you who haven't been around them, electric fences work by startling the livestock, not "electrocuting them". The charger sends a periodic electric pulse through the system. The lines are smooth so animals don't get entangled, so when an animal bumps into, and the next charge comes, then ZAP. A quick pulse turns them away. At our farm we only really kept hogs and vegetable gardens behind electric fences one to keep in, and one to keep out. But electric fences take constant upkeep. If they are grounded by just a little piece of metal, they stop working, or if a hog pushes a pile of dirt up onto the bottom wire of the fence, that can also ground it out, or make it stop working.

It is worth noting here the personality of a hog. Most livestock, upon recognizing a fenced boundary, simply do not test it. They look and see a fence, and generally accept their side of it. Not so with hogs. Hogs are curious and smart and incredibly tough. No matter how good it is on one side of the fence, they ALWAYS want to get on the other side. Besides our kids, they were the only animals on the farm that tried their fences. But they tried them. Every. Single. Day.

Eve and I would be outside working and any given morning at some point we would hear the ZAP of the fence like a clap and the ensuing squeal of a hog to let us know that faith had been restored. They knew the fence was on yesterday, they could often hear the fence pulsing against grass that would fall against it, but the doubt was strong with the hogs. Their faith in that fence

NEEDED to be tested all the time. It was part of their DNA, because this was not just one of our hogs that tried the fences, it was every single one that we had in that paddock. Each day they needed to reassess their situation and ask the question: “Are you still there?”

Consider the Gospel we just heard. This episode from John follows immediately after Mary Magdalene takes Jesus for a gardener, and then realizes that he is the risen Christ, at the tomb. She goes to the other disciples and tells them. She has seen their Lord risen, in the flesh.

According to John’s account, their next move was to lock themselves in a room and hide out. We are not told expressly that the disciples doubt the risen Christ or that they doubt Mary, but we can certainly see that their confidence is not high.

On the day that Jesus fulfilled the scriptures, the day he rose for the dead and conquered death for ever, for everyone, the disciples are locked in a room. Then, Jesus the embodied, resurrected Lord appears miraculously in their midst. He offers them his Peace, and immediately He shows them his wounds.

Jesus understands. Jesus at that moment shows the disciples physically who he is. They touch, they feel, they see, and they believe. Jesus’ first move upon returning to his disciples is not to hand out shouts of joy as the conquering king, neither is it to criticize their fear, but rather it is to honor their humanity, and see respect uncertainty. Then he says, “as God sent me, so I send you.” He gives them the gift of his presence in the Holy Spirit and sends them out into the world.

Then we jump to the next Sunday, which would be this Sunday, the one after Easter, and by what we read we learn that the disciples haven’t gone far with that commissioning. They are back in the room behind the locked door, this time with Thomas. We know from scripture that they have been working on Thomas for the past week and that he CANNOT believe.

Can you imagine how Thomas felt? After leaving his home and following Jesus, Thomas misses the chance to see the risen Lord. I would be inconsolable. This is the most epic FOMO - or Fear

of Missing Out - story EVER, of all time!!! Can you imagine how the conversation went? This is what Jesus said he would do! All of his friends are CONVINCED! They carry with them the Holy Spirit! I mean if anyone, ever, could be convinced of this story, it should have been Thomas, right! He was primed to believe, but he just CAN'T. What do you imagine is going through Thomas' head? I can hear his questions. Are you SURE you saw Jesus; I mean for real? Well, what was he wearing? Well, I believe you think you saw Jesus. Despite all of the disciples telling Thomas that Jesus was here, he just couldn't.

And so, Jesus comes back. He visits again. He again appears on the other side of a locked door. His disciples still locked away, and Thomas refusing to believe. Seems an ominous start to me. But not to Jesus. Jesus responds with Love. He walks in and opens himself bodily to Thomas. He allows Thomas that moment of tenderness. He welcomes Thomas as Thomas needs to be welcomed. Needing that contact. Needing to experience Jesus' humanity. Thomas sees, touches, and believes.

Frederick Buechner says of doubt that "if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

We see here today that the first week of Jesus' resurrected ministry is all about doubt. It is expected. Given the significance of doubt, it certainly seems as though it is essential to our ability to form any kind of faith! Jesus does not admonish the disciples for their behavior, he doesn't ask Thomas why he wouldn't believe. Never do they hear "why didn't you listen to Mary Magdalene". None of that. He walked in, blessed them, and allowed them into himself. He opened his arms as if to say: "I get it. It's OK. It's been a crazy week and I am here because I love you, and I want you to believe, and I know that is hard for you."

He meets them where they are, and he sends them out to do like he has done. Go. Meet people where they are and love them as I have loved you.

The attention paid to the disciple's doubt tells us to expect our own doubts. It is important to ask questions, it is essential that we are uncomfortable with our faith from time to time. God expects

no less and has been dealing with it from the very beginning. It is a gift to have a God that welcomes and understands our need to question. But also, a God that loves us enough to give God's son over to suffering and death that we might have life and life abundantly.

Although our hogs questioned their boundaries each day, they also buttressed their belief in them. It seems they never really expected the fence was off, but they always needed to know. And I should add, we never lost a hog that was testing their fence.

I encourage you to see doubt not as the opposite of faith, but rather the means to a deeper faith. We are not alone in this, God meets us in our doubts and struggles, and expects the hard work that we are bound to do. May we all test the limits of our fences. May we all find rest and security within those spaces. May we too daily doubt, so that we can uncover, clarify, and fortify our own faith.

Amen.