

A Good Question

John 20.19-31

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Easter 2A

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My Julia asks a lot of questions. She asks questions about how things work and why things are the way they are. She asks questions about space and basketball and fashion and gymnastics and pranks and dessert and competition. Her questions are almost always linked to action which adds a layer of complexity and fatigue for the adults tasked with caring for and teaching this curious, determined, and creative 8-year-old thinker.

A question about how to make slime is almost immediately followed by climbing the kitchen counters and pulling supplies down out of the cabinets. A question about how to compete in the Olympics will likely lead to emptying her closets and the backyard shed of costumes, sports equipment, and lawn games to set up an elaborate series of competitions for family or neighbors to run through the events. A question about a popular YouTube channel will invariably end with recording her own toy reviews or American Girl doll suggestions with a follow-up question about how to set up a YouTube channel.

Most recently, she's asked a series of questions about why boys get to have more sports experiences than girls. And why do the boys at school say girls aren't as good as they are. And why don't women get to play football like men. And why do only boys sign up for the basketball program at school. And why can't a woman do all the things a man does. And why can't a woman be president of the United States. The conversations in our house are interesting, to say the least, and frequent, to state the obvious. This line of questioning about gender and sports and leadership and equality led to a bit of a gender-norm strike on Julia's part. For at least two months, maybe three, she refused to wear skirts or dresses because boys don't have to do that. And she preferred to wear her hair under a baseball cap because boys do that all the time. And she wanted to be known, at school in particular, for being just as tough and just as strong and just as capable as all of the boys.

Her fashion strike was rooted in an 8-year-old's sense of justice that started with some good questions posed first at home, and then she took her good questions to her teachers and school leaders. Why do the boys say I can't play as hard as they do? And why isn't there basketball for girls? And why is the world this way? I am grateful to say

she attends one of the many amazing New Orleans Charter schools that makes room for the questions of children and takes seriously the thoughts, emotions, and passions they bring. One school administrator, in particular, latched onto these questions and made remarkable space for Julia and for me to sit and talk about gender, equality, equity, and justice. He sat with her late one afternoon and pulled up videos of WNBA stars to show her images of strong, powerful women using their bodies to run and shoot and dominate in their sport. He listened to my questions about how to best support my daughter and foster dialogue in the school, and he is now creating an opportunity for girls to have their very own basketball team beginning this fall. Moving onto her next challenge, Julia very much hopes they will also accept her team name suggestion—the Bricolage Fireballs. She has a fire in her, to be sure.

My family's experience of the past few months leads us right into John's final verses today. Always on this second Sunday of Easter we read the post-resurrection scene of Thomas, the disciple who needs to see and touch the risen Christ if there is any hope for believing the unbelievable. His demands to touch and see point to his internal questions, "How in the world can any of this be true?" "How in the world am I supposed to believe a word of this?" "How can a person of intellect and reason buy into this absurd story?" "And just what, exactly, am I supposed to do with this risen Jesus?" If your questions, like the ones within Thomas, are dripping with skepticism and doubt, recognize there is no reprimand from Jesus. The whole of scripture, and the God to whom it points, can handle your questions.

Though most pastors I know are a bit weary of Thomas coming back around every Easter season, I am grateful to the lectionary for packaging resurrection and doubt just seven days apart. Doubt is part of our story. As Paul Tillich famously wrote, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith." Questioning is part of our story, but it's not the end of the story. We must understand doubt as part of a process from the trusting faith of childhood to the robust, active faith of adulthood. Richard Rohr talks about a lifecycle of faith that takes us from Construction to Deconstruction to Reconstruction or Order, Disorder, and Reorder. We build this thing (or are given the parts as children and taught how to build it), then we begin to take the pieces apart and question, study, examine each and every one. But the great challenge of adult faith is to put the thing back together again with wisdom, knowing, gratitude for the individual parts and a holy appreciation for the mystery of all of it.

Rohr teaches that not everyone moves through the first two stages to reach the important stage of Reorder or Reconstruction. Some of us get comfortable in Order or Disorder and make our home there. To his observation, "Most conservatives get trapped in the first step [putting the whole thing together as it has been handed to us

and then protecting the perfectly constructed faith] and most liberals get stuck in the second [tearing the thing to pieces, analyzing and studying the deconstructed elements with appropriate dashes of academic integrity]. Healthy religion is all about getting you to the third, Reorder. There is no nonstop flight. You must learn the wisdom of both the first and second stages before moving on," he writes. "The easiest path of growing up spiritually, and in many ways the most natural, is to start with some 'law and order.' Then we must critically recognize that Order cannot solve all or even most problems, especially pain and suffering. Finally, without rejecting either Order or Disorder, grace will move you toward God's Reorder. This is enlightened awareness, which is not nearly as common as we would like."<sup>1</sup>

Julia and Thomas and Tillich and Rohr have all taught me: A good question is a powerful tool and not a problem to be feared. Likewise, it's not enough to toss questions out into the ether and then call it a day. We need to ask good questions in such a way that we are moving toward enlightened awareness. Like my curious daughter, we need to ask questions that lead us to action. And when we're talking about asking good questions in the church, we need to ask the ones that lead us to deconstruct what desperately needs to be taken apart and then continue working with our questions as we put the better and truer thing back together again. We will do this over and over again throughout our lives. And if the content of John 20 has anything to say on the matter, Jesus welcomes our questions, welcomes our doubt, and patiently stands before us saying study my hands, reach for me. Let your doubt turn to belief.

Nancy Rockwell reminds us how doubt works as she adds her comments on the lectionary and liturgical pairing of resurrection and doubt. She notes, "The Sunday after Easter is devoted to doubt. The story of Doubting Thomas is always read, no matter what year of the three year cycle we are in. Doubt is huge. And since the very first Easter, everyone has known doubt is important.

But waiting a week to bring doubt into focus makes it seem as if there is a Doubt Delay – first, you get excited and run around and celebrate – then, you doubt. That isn't the real story about doubt. Doubt was part of the entire Easter picture, from Maundy Thursday right through Easter Day. At the Last Supper the disciples drew back from Jesus' foot washing – doubting his gesture, divining his meaning and shrinking from the changes to their own intentions, still intent on glory."<sup>2</sup> Our path of faith is not a straight or smooth one, as we already know from the path of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cac.org/the-invitation-of-grace-2016-03-21/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/doubt-the-demon-and-the-angel-of-easter/>

The gospel writer knows this whole story is complicated and layered. Perhaps John is using the Thomas narrative as a teaching image and metaphor just as he has with other guiding images throughout his gospel. The painters and poets often get at truth in a way we prose writers often can't. David Impastato's on *Contemporary Christian Poetry* pointed me toward one of Wendell Berry's Sabbath poems written in 1980. "For Wendell Berry, the silence and intellectual darkness that in one way or another shadows the faith...can be transformed into the very conditions that nurture spiritual growth. In 'Sabbaths: 1980 VI,' Berry argues that the mind unaided by faith must necessarily arrive at a darkness on the ultimate questions. But held in faith as mystery, darkness can be a power that 'heals,' like the 'living shadow' created by the poem's canopy of young trees."<sup>3</sup>

The intellect so ravenous to know  
And in its knowing hold the very light,  
Disclosing what is so and what not so,

Must finally know the dark, which is its right  
And liberty; it's blind in what it sees.  
Bend down, go in by this low door, despite

The thorn and briar that bar the way. The trees  
Are young here in the heavy undergrowth  
Upon an old field worn out by disease

Of human understanding; greed and sloth  
Did bad work that this thicket now conceals,  
Work lost to rain or ignorance or both.

The young trees make a darkness here that heals,  
And here the forms of human thought dissolve  
Into the living shadow that reveals

All orders made by mortal hand or love  
Or thought come to a margin of their kind,  
Are lost in order we are ignorant of

Which stirs great fear and sorrow in the mind,  
The field, if it will thrive, must do so by

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<sup>3</sup> David Impastato, *Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry*, pp. 322-323

Exactitude of thought, by skill of hand,  
  
And by the clouded mercy of the sky;  
It is a mortal clarity between  
Two darks, of Heaven and of Earth. The why  
  
It is *our* measure. Seen and unseen,  
Its causes shape it as it is, a while.  
O bend by fear and sorrow, now bend down,  
  
Leave word and argument, be dark and still,  
And come into the joy of healing shade.  
Rest from your work. Be still and dark until  
  
You grow unloosing, unafraid  
As the young trees, without thought or belief;  
Until the shadow Sabbath light has made  
  
shudders, breaks open, shines in every leaf.

My hope for you and for me is not that we snap our fingers and believe as though a faith spell has been cast. My hope for you and for me is that we give ourselves to the process of becoming and believing, deconstructing and reconstructing even when it's weird and bizarre and doesn't make sense. This is work as slow as healing the soil of a field and planting trees that slowly grow to adulthood. And just maybe, the good questions we ask, the ones guiding us in our lives, may already be written into this ancient story we are holding in our hands.

Nancy Rockwell adds this final note, one worth chasing in its own sermon (perhaps next year)... "Thomas is a Greek name, and it means twin, though his twin, if he had one, never appears, and some suggest we are, each of us, his twin. For each of us has our nagging doubts that sometimes prompt us to get up and investigate a situation that needs our attention, and that sometimes hold us back. If Thomas' doubts are the most persistent, then he is our twin because our doubts persist, and at times are insistent, and they have the ability to lead us to new discoveries about ourselves and in our relationship with all that is holy."<sup>4</sup> Take comfort, my brothers and sisters, in your twin Thomas and the testimony of his faith. Like him, may your nagging doubts and cautious suspicions lead you ever closer to all that is holy. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/doubt-the-demon-and-the-angel-of-easter/>