FAITH AND DOUBT
April 22, 2012, The Third Sunday in Easter
Luke 24: 36-43
Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
Theme: By the grace of God, even doubt can help faith grow and mature.

Gracious God, sometimes the Scripture readings we hear fall on our ears shrouded in mystery. Give us courage to listen hard, straining to catch a whisper of the truth high and deep, ancient and fresh. May your Holy Spirit amplify our hearing and deepen our understanding. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and Redeemer.

I have a friend named Michael Jinkins. Back in 1988, he was an assistant minister on the staff of a Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen, Scotland. Michael was in crisis. Specifically he was having a crisis of faith. He was beset with doubt about everything he had once believed – including the Resurrection. When Easter Sunday arrived, he was glad he would not be preaching. He wasn’t sure what he could have said.

The preacher come Easter Sunday was the Senior Minister, Thomas Allsop. Michael remembers that Allsop’s words that day seemed to have been aimed at him and him alone. Michael said that it was as if the preacher had been reading his mind. Allsop opened his sermon, almost offhandedly, by saying this: “You know, the disciples couldn’t believe it either.”

Over time, Michael Jinkins was able to wrestle his doubts into a mature Christian faith, never perhaps entirely free of doubt, rather a faith ironically strengthened by his doubts. He is still a minister, indeed a man of deep and seasoned Christian conviction. In fact, Michael Jinkins is now President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Many of you may know him as the father of one of our former seminary interns here at Brick – Jeremy Jinkins.
In that Easter sermon in Aberdeen 24 years ago, Allsop pointed out that Jesus’ followers reacted to the Resurrection not with simple faith, but with “fear,” “terror,” “disbelief,” and, yes, “doubt.” Those are the very words that pepper all the accounts of the Resurrection in the Gospels.

The single sentence that perhaps most perfectly captures this ambiguity in the disciples’ response to the stunning news that Jesus was somehow alive is the 41st verse of the passage Don read a moment ago. Hear it again: “… in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” That says it all. In our joy, most of us are – sometimes anyway – just like them: “disbelieving and still wondering.”

The story of Jesus’ after-Easter appearance to his followers is downright mind-bending. How to understand it!? Jesus is not a ghost. Ghosts don’t eat; that’s the point of the fish business. Nor, on the other hand, is Jesus a resuscitated body, a person who will one day die again. The force of the mind-bending enigma is that the Risen Christ is a new creation, a beyond-our-categories reality. Christ is life triumphant. Christ is life eternal. Christ is the empowering divine presence beyond us, yet with us.

As Michael Jinkins, now the seminary president, reflects back on his “bout with doubt” in Scotland years ago, he says this about faith and doubt in general: “… belief issues forth from doubt.” He writes,

“At the very least, belief and doubt are not opposites. They are intimately related responses in those who are actually paying attention to the amazing acts of God among us.”

Hear that last bit again. It’s the crux of the matter: Faith and doubt, Jinkins says, “are intimately related responses in those who are actually paying attention to the amazing acts of God among us.”

Jinkins is not alone in suggesting that doubt is not exactly the opposite of faith, indeed suggesting that doubt may be – most ironically – a part of faith. Asking awkward questions – even those big questions that cross into doubt – is a back-and-forth dialogue that is, oddly enough, a part of believing.

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I’m not talking about bleak, utter doubt. I’m not talking about that despairing doubt that atheist Richard Dawkins offered up in his book, *The God Delusion*. Surprisingly, Dawkins’ doubt may not now be as categorical as it was. In a recent debate with Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dawkins allowed that he is no longer 100% sure about his atheism. But even if his atheism is not as cock-sure as it was, his book on atheism gathered generally devastatingly negative reviews in journals not famous for piety, the *London Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, *Harper’s* and the *New York Times Book Review*.

In a more personal essay on Dawkin’s book, University of Chicago theologian Martin Marty said this about the author, “His career and his book are devoted to opposing all... manifestations of faith.” Then Marty says this of himself: “My vocation is to do my doubting within the context of faith.” That’s exactly what my friend Michael Jinkins is saying.

They are not alone. The great 20th Century German-American theologian, Paul Tillich, always insisted on the same point, namely that doubt isn’t the opposite of faith, but rather an element of faith. The eminently quotable Presbyterian minister and novelist, Fred Buechner, put the point most memorably:

> “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep.” Then he adds (I like his metaphor), “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

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I am a fan of the current chief rabbi of Great Britain, a brilliant man named Jonathan Sacks. In an essay he wrote several years ago, Sacks said much the same thing as Christians Jinkins, Tillich, Marty and Buechner. “To be without questions,” the rabbi said, “is not a sign of faith, but of lack of depth.”

So according to these great men of great faith, the doubt that nagged at Jesus’ followers after Easter was not so much faith’s antithesis as it was faith’s
discomfiting shadow. Doubt seems to be like a questioning sidekick, toddling along just behind you, prodding you with awkward interrogations. As much as you and I might wish doubt would just get lost, the odd and ironic truth is that it can actually be used by God (used by God!) to deepen and mature our faith.

A simple example: a person who has since childhood imagined God as an old white man up in heaven suddenly finds that she doubts such a God. These doubts then cajole her to move her faith beyond naïveté to a more expansive imagining of the Divine Mystery. Another illustration: a person who reads the Bible as literal science or literal history suddenly encounters the intractable intellectual problems with this. He is then moved by the crisis to a richer appreciation of the way that Scripture is spiritually and theologically true, even when it’s not “history” or “science.”

Strangely enough, going to seminary often provokes such a faith crisis. People imagine scrubbed young Christians, pious and bursting with enthusiasm, marching off to seminary to have their firm faith ramped up a few notches. But in fact, many seminarians have an early knock-down, drag-out “bout with doubt.” Example: an honest theological education exposes seminary students to the fact that most Bible scholars don’t believe that David wrote many of what have traditionally been called “The Psalms of David.” They learn that the Book of Genesis probably had three or four authors, none of them Moses. They’re taught that Genesis contains not one, but two rather different creation stories. They read the Book of Judges for the first time, much of which is bloody and violent, an upsetting book to have in the Bible. They learn that the four Gospels don’t agree in every particular. The God they encounter in Systematic Theology class is anything but the Old-Man-on-a-Cloud-with-a-Beard they were introduced to by dear old Mrs. Jones in 5th Grade Sunday School class. But here’s the good news. After wrestling mightily with such questions and the doubts that often come with them, most all seminarians emerge with a faith that is stronger and more mature than the faith they had when they started theological studies.

Two weeks from today, we’ll confirm twenty young people, the Brick Church confirmation class of 2012. They have been studying together for some five months, at the end of which each of them was asked to write a statement of faith. I

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read through these statements of faith this last week.

One of the questions they were asked to respond to inquired as to how Brick Church might improve. One confirmand suggested more food at Coffee Hour. My favorite idea for improvement suggested installing trampolines in the sanctuary for use during worship.

Seriously and more to the point, there were some remarkable consistencies in these statements of faith. I was reminded that sports matter a lot to many 14-year-olds. I read that teachers and parents are deeply influential. A remarkable number of these twenty statements of faith posed the classic theodicy question in some form. They never used the word, but the theodicy question is basically this: “If God is powerful and good, why is there so much suffering?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

But there was one consistency in these statements of faith that is especially pertinent to this sermon. These kids, like all of us, wrestle with doubt – sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. Again and again, one of these 14-year-old theologians would say something like this: “When I started in the confirmation class, I thought this about God. I doubted that. Now I have moved on to another, deeper way of thinking about God.” One of the confirmands even wrote a remarkable poem about this wrestling match between faith and doubt that can lead to deeper faith. Addressing God, his poem reads:

   “Once, I thought I saw You clearly,  
    Then I saw I was wrong,  
     And You became clear in my eyes.  
      Then You were not clear in my eyes;  
       Now You return brighter than before.”

I began this sermon by telling you about my friend Michael Jinkins and his experience with doubt. I want to end with words that Michael recently wrote about that crisis:

   “It was a long time after that Easter in 1988 that I told Tom what his sermon
had meant to me. I suppose it took a while for me to risk his knowing that his assistant had not believed in the resurrection that Easter morning. But I need not have worried. Tom preached that sermon out of his own honest struggles with doubt and belief. He understood that witnesses to the good news of the gospel, if they are trustworthy witnesses, bear in themselves the tracks of their own pilgrimage of faith, a faith that more often than not involves some terror and some surprise, some disbelieving and some wonder—much like the faith of the first disciples.”

So take comfort in this: doubt is not so much the enemy of your faith as it is your faith’s adversarial dialogue partner. Good questions poke and prod and challenge, but in the end, by the Grace of God, they can push and pull us toward a deeper and more mature faith.

So when doubt nips at your heels, ask how this dogged little hound might actually be nudging you to wrestle with questions that will mature your faith, grow your faith into an ever more tempered, wise, and well-seasoned trust in God. And also remember this: through all your doubts, God never once doubts you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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