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!!'s and ??'s

John 20: 19-29

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It's not too hard to notice that, on Easter Sunday, there are a lot of exclamation points; they really smack you in the face. "He is risen!" – exclamation point. "Risen, indeed!" – exclamation point. Every other line of the Call to Worship has an exclamation point. Our opening hymn was "Christ the Lord is risen today!," exclamation point, and at the close of the service, we'll sing the Hallelujah Chorus – definitely an exclamation point.

It's a day of exclamation points because we're here charged with joy, victory and hope. New life is now; resurrection life – exclamation point.

That being said, however, every year when I stand here looking into your faces and when I examine my own soul, I notice more than exclamation points. Often, if you're anything like me, you're filled with question marks: What happened 2,000 years ago on that Sunday morning and why does that matter to me, today? To the world? How can I sing songs like, "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Won" when the world is filled with strife, when there's so much destruction, suffering and sorrow – everywhere? How can I affirm things like Paul does: "Death is swallowed up in victory," when my loved one is dying or has died too soon? And what about all these things that disturb more than my mind; what about those things that pull so many ways at my soul?

Surely Easter is a day when many of us feel compelled to worship because of the exclamation points; you're bursting with joy. But others come because of the question marks, or, most likely, you're a great mixture of them both. So, today, those of you here with exclamation points don't need a sermon. The day itself, with the music and stories and sense of spirit, is enough; it reaffirms the resurrection in your own soul. This sermon, then, is for those of us with more question marks than exclamation points.

So, first of all, I want to say that if you're full of question marks, you're not alone. Not just today among a skeptical society where millions sit in pews all around the world filled with question marks; it goes all the way back to the writers of the Gospels themselves. The resurrection accounts in the Gospels describe people for whom Easter also raised questions. Look at Matthew: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28: 16-17). In Mark, Mary Magdalene

and Mary the mother of James and Salome, are greeted at Jesus' tomb by a man dressed in a white robe who says: "Don't be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, here is the place they laid him" (Mark 16: 6). And what's their response? Jumping up and down for joy with exclamation points all over the place? Listen: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16: 8).

Luke writes that Mary and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and some other women leave the tomb and report all this to the apostles. "But," according to Luke, "these things seemed to [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24: 11). Luke then proceeds to write about Jesus' appearance to ten disciples in Jerusalem on Easter evening. Were they excited? Overwhelmed with joy while showered with exclamation points? Listen: ". . . [the disciples] were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost" (24: 37).

And John's account of the first Easter starts a bit like that, too. Mary sees an empty tomb. In distress, she runs and tells Peter and the Beloved Disciples who race to the grave, look in, find nothing and go on home. Mary sticks around (it is always the women, isn't it?), and weeps outside the tomb, soon finding herself talking with Jesus whom she supposes is the gardener until finally Jesus calls her by name and she sees and experiences the risen Christ. . . . Question marks.

All of this and we haven't even considered the second Gospel reading, Doubting Thomas. Remember that Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the other disciples on Easter evening. When they told Thomas that they had seen the risen Christ, he said he wasn't buying any of that unless he experienced Christ himself, saw and felt the nail prints and Jesus' pierced side.

Maybe you've heard a preacher or two stop the story there, making Thomas a good target to trash doubters, throw out a few more exclamation points and expect people to believe. But listen again to the rest of the story:

"A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'"

Finally, an exclamation point: "My Lord and my God!" But only after many, many question marks. Belief (which for the Gospel of John is personal experience, not blind assent to something), came only after Thomas was given the freedom to doubt, to use his mind as well as his heart, to give his soul the freedom to connect with the One alive in him beyond his knowing. Thomas could only come to this rich, deep experience, not based on what someone else told him or anybody trying to convince or convert him. It came out of Thomas' own wrestling and question marks.

Maybe on this Easter Sunday you're like Thomas; I know I am. Most of the time, I have a lot more question marks than exclamation points, though, so often, they're all mixed together. Through years of wrestling with God, the way things are today and what it means to be human, I've learned that, for me, it is only by asking hard and deep questions that I get any kind of clarity whatsoever. And I'm talking about hard questions, questions that demand a lot from me and of me, questions that are much, much more than the surface conversations most of our public dialogue encourages. These are questions that challenge my way of looking at things and my personal living; they shine a light on the status quo, are questions that butt up against the accepted, standard pat answers, questions that push and poke and strike at the envelope surrounding our faith. It's questions like, "Are you living the authentic you, living out what the risen Christ within you is yearning for you to say 'yes' to? Is what you believe consistent with the way life really is? Are you really doing all you can to be a balm of reconciliation in this divided world? How often do you stop and "consider the lilies of the field," as Jesus asks?" These are the questions that lead to a deeper looking at the God I am coming to know, the risen Christ, who empowers my life.

You know, for many, the purpose of questions is to get answers. Or they're puzzles or mysteries to be solved. And that's one way to look at it. But I want to say to you that ambiguity and/or the deep questions that well up within us, are a part of life, not necessarily meant to be answered then checked off and that's that. The deep questions are to be lived and all I can do is speak from my experience when I say that it has been the deep questions that have led me and continue to lead me to a deeper relationship with God. It's the questions that follow any answer I may come to – the exclamation points – that keep me in the Garden alongside of Mary, longing to experience the risen One.

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One final thought about Thomas as his questions and exclamation points come together. Notice what Thomas did between his questioning and exclamation points: he stayed in communion with his fellow disciples. He didn't stay away from them because of all the awful things they had experienced. He didn't drop out because he didn't believe like the others did, or bug out of organized religion because of all its faults, thinking he could practice his spirituality all on his own. He continued to be a part of the community of Jesus.

As I said, I'm like Thomas. Sometimes, I come to Easter with a lot more question marks than exclamation points, and every year, because I'm in a community of disciples like this one, that encourages questions and doubts and embraces the fact that we live with ambiguity, I feel free to be the authentic person Jesus so desires me to be. I can wrestle with things, ponder, come to my own conclusions in the company of other seekers, and that energizes me to be able to affirm my faith in Christ like Thomas did. And then, I can say that these are truths I hold dear: that Jesus is as much of God as I will ever see or know in a human being, but because my sight and my mind is limited, I know that God is much more wonderful, than even Jesus can show me' that love is stronger than fear and hatred, that life is always coming on, bursting forth out of death. I know that we belong – to life, to one another, to Earth, to God – and that God loves you with a love that will never, ever let you go. I know because I have experienced the

risen Christ, a powerful symbol that shows that all life is sacred and precious to God, that no one or no thing is worthless – we are all needed and precious in God's sight. I believe that meaning and purpose come in giving yourself to something or someone larger than yourself and that resurrection happens every time you give yourself away in love and service. And I believe that death is like a comma, not a period, for it marks a transition into a new and different and amazing life.

All this I believe, mixed bag of questions and exclamation points that I am. And having said that, I hear the words of Jesus to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

So, may yours be a wonderful Easter, a day of new life, new meaning, new purpose. If your Easter is filled with exclamation points, then live joyously in the risen Christ, giving yourself to whatever it is your soul is calling you to serve. But if not exclamation points or a mixture thereof, may your Easter faith be like Thomas', unafraid to honestly express all your doubts and fears and misgivings and questions to the claims of this day. And may it all lead you to be part of a company of Jesus' disciples, here or wherever that may be.

May God bless you and may every day be a day of resurrection.