

# Expressing Your Feelings (Even Your Doubts)

4/16/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Claire Curneen (Irish, 1968–), *Empty Tomb* (detail), 2018.

Preaching on:  
John 20:19–31

This Lent I reread a bestseller from 2012--*The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*, by Bronnie Ware. Ware worked for many years as a palliative care nurse in hospice and got to know her dying patients very well. She noticed that all of them, in dying, were going through a process of transformation. And in that process of life review, they would speak to her about their lives—their memories, their joys, and (almost always) their regrets. According to Ware, the five most common regrets of the dying were:

1. "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."
2. "I wish I hadn't worked so hard."

3. "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings."
4. "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends."
5. "I wish that I had let myself be happier."

This Easter season I'm going to preach through these regrets. This is the season of resurrection after all—a resurrection which we all share in—not just in some distant future, but in our lives now. And so Easter is the perfect season to live as though death were already behind us, as though we were free to tackle life again without regrets. This week I'll be preaching about regret number 3. *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.*

That's a wonderful way of putting things, especially to religious people like us. *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.* Religious people like us are sometimes referred to by our more charismatic brothers and sisters in the faith as "The Frozen Chosen." It's a little mean, but we're still smiling because we recognize that it's also a little bit true. Religious people like us often think the most important part about faith is believing in something. But I think the *most* important part about faith is expressing something—something deep, and real, and true, and unique to each one of us. And yeah, sure, you've got to believe in it to do that. But if you don't express your faith, if you don't express yourself and who you truly are to the world, what does it matter what you do or don't believe? Faith matters most when it is expressed! Faith loses its aliveness when it's locked up inside of us with no outlet.

So, in order to talk about finding the courage to express ourselves in life, I think we first need to discuss one of the things I think is most responsible for locking faith up inside of us—our fear of our own doubts. You all know that Thomas, from our scripture reading this morning is remembered as "Doubting Thomas." And we've come to believe that being a "doubting Thomas" is a very bad thing. We think that doubts are the opposite of faith. Not from my perspective. The opposite of faith, from my perspective, isn't doubt, it's certainty. Every person of faith has doubt. Doubt is humble, it's self-aware, it's fully human. At our best, we doubt. It's the people who have no doubts whatsoever that we need to be wary of, isn't it? People who have no doubts whatsoever can be dangerous to others and to themselves. I say this recognizing that tomorrow we will be commemorating with our Jewish neighbors and other interfaith allies, Yom HoShoa (Holocaust Remembrance Day). What is a conscience if it's not a still, small voice of doubt?

I was speaking to my father-in-law this week, who is a very deep and sensitive guy, a man of faith, and as I was telling him about some struggles I'm having in life and ministry (nothing too special—just, ya know, life!) and he asked me, "With everything you're going through have you ever doubted God?" And I laughed and said, "Oh, that's what I'm preaching about on Sunday!" And I said that some people are very intimidated by doubt because they believe it's antithetical to faith, that it destroys faith, but I believe it's an integral part of faith. If you're going to be so bold as to believe in truth, beauty, meaning, purpose, love, justice, and resurrection in a world that it is so often dominated by power, greed,

conflict, lies, tragedy, exploitation, oppression, hatred, fear, sin, and death, then doubting could just be thought of as paying your dues to faith.

Doubt doesn't have to be an unhealthy part of your life. Doubt is a challenge. But a life without challenges is often dull. And life that meets those challenges head on can be very fulfilling—not easy, not fair, but fulfilling, meaningful. I told my father-in-law that because we're taught that doubt is bad, most of us only allow ourselves to feel doubt when something bad happens. So, the earthquake knocks my house down and in my pain and mourning and anger my defenses come down and I indulge myself in doubting God's power, or love, or existence.

But when we recognize that doubt isn't bad, we can feel it even when everything is going great. Then it doesn't feel like our doubts are connected to tragedy. They're really not. They're connected to our faith. So, I told my father-in-law, I doubt God way before things get hard, which allows me the luxury of not being overwhelmed by doubt when I'm at my most spiritually and emotionally vulnerable. I have already *expressed* my doubts. I haven't overcome them, but I am in a healthy relationship with them, and so they have become integrated into my faith, rather than undermining my faith. This is the place, I think, we all want to get to. Everything going well in your life? Congratulations! Now may be the right time to look more deeply into your doubts.

Jesus' final word in our reading this morning is "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe" NOT "Blessed are those who have not doubted, and yet have come to believe." NOBODY believes without first having doubted. If there was nothing to doubt, there would be nothing to believe in.

So, we're becoming friends with doubt. Doubt's not so intimidating. In fact, some doubt is far healthier, spiritually, than no doubt. And maybe we'd like to EXPRESS ourselves a little more. *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.* In her book, Bronnie Ware says, "Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result." Ware's advice to the living who want to avoid this regret, is to live courageously in relationship to one another.

Peace without honesty in our relationships or in a community is not true peace. The potential turmoil and pain is just held by you alone. That's not peaceful. Because instead of expressing your feelings, you just have to stuff them down into the toe of your sock—repress them. Just as faith and doubt are not opposites, peace and conflict are not opposites. Peace is wholly positive, not negative. So peace is not the absence of something—the absence of conflict, for example. Peace is a state of being, a way of dealing with the ever-present conflict. Repressing our true feelings and the conflict that we know will arise when we do express those difficult feelings cannot honestly be called "keeping the peace." It's just "keeping the lack of peace to myself." And if you do that enough, it will prevent you from being

your best self, it will prevent your community from being the best it can be, and you will regret it.

So, instead of calling him Doubting Thomas, what if we called him Thomas-with-the-Courage-to-Express-His-Feelings? So often Thomas' story is interpreted in a way so that the emotional take away is just, "Keep your mouth shut." Don't talk about your deepest feelings and needs (as Thomas does). Join the Frozen Chosen. We all have doubts, and we keep them to ourselves. By extension we keep a lot of our faith to ourselves as well because we're so intimidated by our repressed doubts, it's hard to trust our faith.

But is that really what happens in Thomas' story? No way! Thomas walks into the upper room, the disciples share the good news with him, and he expresses the doubt that almost all of us would have felt, when almost all of us probably would have held our tongues. He expresses his vulnerability and his need. "If it's true, I need to see him. No. No! If it's true, I need to touch him." Wow. Bold. But faith has to be bold.

And what does Thomas receive—for his "doubt"? This isn't a fairytale, right? Doubting Thomas isn't struck down by lightning for his lack of faith. The moral of the story isn't that because Thomas expressed his doubts, he never experienced Christ's resurrection and lived an empty existence until he died full of regret. No, Thomas is invited into an intimate embrace with Jesus—a communion with his risen body that the other disciples weren't offered—to touch him and put his fingers and hands inside the wounds of his resurrection body. Wowser.

There is no more intimate act in the gospels than this one, and it came about because Thomas expressed his feelings, his doubt, and his need. I'm sure it was a long, difficult, dark week for Thomas, struggling out loud with his doubt. But on the other side of that challenge, comes this reward—a moment of transcendence far greater than our own meager ability to simply cast doubt out of our lives, a relationship that is transformed for the greater, and a faith that by honestly facing a challenge has become deeper, fuller, and more real.

Jesus' final word in our reading this morning is "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe" NOT "Blessed are those who have not doubted, and yet have come to believe." NOBODY believes without first having doubted. If there was nothing to doubt, there would be nothing to believe in. And without expressing himself, there never would have been an invitation to something far greater than he could have achieved by keeping his mouth shut. And without feelings being expressed and dealt with, without the conflict that arises being dealt with, there can be no peace; we cannot be our best selves, only repressed versions of ourselves; there can be no peace, only regret.

So, beloved, this Easter I recommend to you to follow Thomas' example. Don't let your doubts or your fear of conflict intimidate you into not expressing your feelings, into not expressing your faith.