

"And then there was doubt"

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April 3, 2005

I know that there are far more important things going on in our world but I wanted to ask you a question. Do you believe there is a Loch Ness monster? Why / or why not? I read this week that there is a man named Bob Rines, a patent lawyer from Boston, trained as a physicist and engineer at M.I.T. He is the holder of more than 80 patents. Among his inventions is a type of high-definition sonar equipment for which he was inducted into the Inventors' Hall of Fame. A modernized version of another of his inventions guided Patriot missiles during the Gulf War, and has been used to find large underwater objects, such as the Titanic. Bob has been studying the Loch Ness monster in Scotland since June 23, 1972, when he spotted a large, dark hump, covered with rough, mottled skin, like the back of an elephant, in the 800-foot-deep Loch Ness. Rines and his companions, estimated the hump to be about 25-feet long. It extended four to six feet out of the water. Using photographic and lighting equipment he has designed, he has since taken four famous photographs: two in 1972, of what appears to be a rhomboid flipper; and two in 1975 -- one that seems to depict, in terrifying close-up, a monstrous head, and one of what looks something like a swimming brontosaurus, shot from beneath. This last picture leads Rines to believe that the Loch Ness monster is a plesiosaur -- an aquatic brontosaurus-type dinosaur. In spite of the fact that the

pictures were published in Nature, a well-respected British scientific journal, many people still do not believe the existence of any such monster.

Do you believe? I am not really too concerned if you believe in a Loch Ness monster or not – but I am concerned about whether or not you believe in the message of the Gospel.

Are you aware that every year on the Sunday after Easter we have exactly the same Gospel reading? It is this ‘good ol’ doubting Thomas’ text. It is automatic - an incredible proclamation has been made. Human logic immediately raises it’s head and we say it is impossible. Doubting is almost automatic after we reach a certain age. Those who don’t have a well developed ‘doubt’ reflex are just called gullible. And aren’t gullible people fun?

This morning I put some signs on the back three pews in our sanctuary. Be honest now. How many of you touched those back pews to find out if there was really wet paint? How many actually sat in those pews because they checked it out and found out that the sign was not the truth? Didn’t you believe the signs? Didn’t you read the fine print {Danger - if you sit in this pew you may be in a sermon illustration}? Don’t you believe in the printed word - even in the church?

It is not my intent, this morning to criticize the disciple Thomas. Nor is it my intent to shake my head at those who struggle with doubt. In fact - as strange as it may seem, I want to commend doubt to you this morning.

There is a great theologian named Paul Tillich who wrote an essay entitled "The Courage To Be" in which he states that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an integral part of faith. I really appreciate that statement because I believe that it is doubt that drives us to ask the questions that ultimately deepen our faith and make it come to life.

We have made an incredible proclamation - Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead. As Luke tells the story of these events, he relays how the women came to the disciples after having been to the empty tomb. They told the disciples what they had seen and heard. Luke goes on to say that the disciples dismissed the whole thing because it seemed like "nonsense" or "an idle tale". But I am willing to bet that they talked about it. Perhaps they even shared a few concerns about how to help the women in their grief. Mostly, I am sure that they would have struggled with the issues through the day. Then found themselves face to face with the risen Jesus that evening [when Thomas was out at the local K-Mart getting supplies]. Did they believe immediately - NO! Jesus breathed on them - He said "Peace be with you!" - and then He even showed them his scared hands. ---- Then and only then did they finally believe. Doubts are not the problem when it comes to faith. The problem is that too often we don't stick around long enough to ask the questions. We question the wet paint signs - and we reach out and touch to learn the truth. But we don't take time to raise the same questions about our faith in God. We do not reach out and touch to find out if what we are told is true or not.

We have so many advantages in our religious journey. We have the whole story laid out before us in a way that the early church did not. For them the whole thing was totally new. We have a long history of those who have led the way in struggling with understanding how God is revealed in Jesus Christ. We have the advantage of having had ancestors who have walked faithfully with God and brought us into a church family that is completely full of the traditions of our fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents. And we have come year after year to hear the same messages – the whole thing is deeply engraved on who we are. So much so that I believe that we just don't bother to ask many questions. We sing the songs and say that we love the Easter Lilies but we don't struggle with the very legitimate questions about God that this incredible Easter story raises and what it all means to us. It is amazing to me that too often we will have more doubts and questions about a wet paint sign than we will about a risen Christ.

Is it even remotely possible that after suffering through a trial, the flogging, being nailed to a cross and being pierced by a spear that Jesus could rise from the dead? If, by faith, I can accept the fact that it actually happened - what does that say about God? If God has that kind of power - a power that reverses the most irreversible event in our world - is God still using that power in our world - in our lives? If so how? What is God doing in my life? If the story is true, why did God do it? What did it all

accomplish? If it is true and God has do this for the world and for me – what does it mean for my life?

Jesus steps into a room where His followers are gather and His Holy spirit fills the air - His Spirit fills the room and begins to flow into the disciples. And when Jesus speaks - after having been raised from the dead - the first things He says was - ‘... great trick, huh? Guess we showed those Romans and Pharisees. Now let go out and conquer the world’ — NO! What He said was - "Peace be with you!" In a world filled with dangers and pains - good laughs and wonderful busy times - filled with suffering and relaxing days, Jesus wants His disciples to be at peace. The greatest enemy in the world has been conquered - God is at work! "Peace be with you!"

AMEN