



**March 30, 2008**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

John 20:19-31

## “Worms of Doubt”

When I was a child I played outdoors often. I savored the feel of dust under my bare feet on hot summer days, the smell of rain on the warm earth, the tumult of a thunderstorm. I also was fascinated by the earth’s creatures and studied them closely. Sometimes I’d find a dead bird or chipmunk. I’d see how little wormlike things ate away their flesh, and I felt sad and a bit creeped out. But I wasn’t repulsed by earthworms. I put several in jars with holes punched in the lid along with dirt and twigs. I named them “Elmer” and “Dudley” and so forth. My parents taught me earthworms are good for the soil and for growing things because they make holes for air to refresh the soil. I came to see worms as both helpers and destroyers.

Today’s Gospel tells us the familiar story of the apostle Thomas, who missed the risen Christ’s first appearance. He was seriously skeptical as he heard the others’ tale. We have called him “doubting Thomas”. Sometimes we call each other that same thing, and it never is a compliment.

We aren’t comfortable with doubt as it related to faith. We see doubt as a worm eating holes in a living creature, destroying it little by little.

But is that really what doubt does? Think of our Scripture. What effect did Thomas’ doubt have on the other disciples? How did they treat Thomas when he expressed his doubt? What was the result of his doubt in his own life?

It is clear that Thomas was not the only disciple to display doubt in the face of Jesus’ ministry. They all had felt doubt at numerous times as they journeyed together. So, in Thomas, the others probably saw themselves. Did they throw him

out of their group? Not at all. They actually became more convinced of their own faith, and tried to share their conviction with Thomas. And the result of Thomas' doubt in his own life??? Well, his doubting brought Jesus right to his side, offering proof of his own suffering to his friend and follower.

It appears doubt did not eat up or eat away the faith forming in this little group of friends. It seems doubt may have resembled the air holes earthworms make--- air holes that allow the fresh air of the Holy Spirit to continuously revitalize conviction. The Bible shows us we are all doubters at times, and our doubt may help us to experience the closeness of Christ, who comes with power and reassurance. The Bible also teaches that those who are doubting and questioning are to be welcomed into the faith community, and not thrown out.

Have you seen any of the personalized children's books that are now available? You order a book for a favorite child, providing the child's name, gender, age, birthday, street address, friends' names, pets' names etc. The computer prints out a book with color illustrations in which the child is the main character. 'Once upon a time in a place called Saint Charles there lived a little boy named Gavin Hunt. Now Gavin wasn't an ordinary little boy. This is a story about one of his adventures. It's the story of the day Gavin met the rhinoceros.

So, do you think Gavin would like this book? Would it be special to him? Why? It's a "me-book". It's a story about himself. We all like stories about ourselves.

Bob Benson calls the Bible a "me-book" and a "you-book". We are in there. In his words, *We all have taken our turn at saying, "There is no room at the inn," and we all know what it is like to sadly reverse our paths like the rich young ruler. We all know what it is like to say of Jesus, "I don't know him," or to leave unsaid, "Yes, I am a follower of his." We all have bravely said in stirring faith, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God," and we all have felt or said, "Unless I touch the prints of his hands, I will not believe." The Bible is not just a book written a long time ago about some people who lived way back then. It is about us. It is not just a book about a few people to whom Jesus said, "Lo, I will never leave you." It is to us, as well that these words still speak. It was not only their sorrow he promised to turn into joy, but he was saying to us just as surely as if he were looking us in the face that the thing that seems like sorrow to us today, he would have us writing poems and singing songs about tomorrow or next week. These things were said to us and for us and about us in this living book of God.*

A story, by William White, entitled "The Holy Week Visitor" brings this alive. It's a fiction story, but then again, it's not. It's a story about you and me, about God-with-us, about doubt opening air holes for new growth of faith. Listen to White's words:

(Edited version)

*March 31, Maundy Thursday evening, Pam Nesheim breathed a sigh of relief and sat down at the piano. It had been a long day and she finally had the children in bed. Her husband was upstairs working on his Good Friday sermon. Rick found Holy Week with its four sermons in eight days pure torture. Playing the piano was a release for Pam who worried whenever Rick worried.*

*As she began to play she heard pounding and the back door opened noisily. Pam leaped from the piano, dashed to the kitchen and discovered a small man with a large beard weaving into the room. Pam edged her way to the stairs and tried not to sound frightened. "Rick," she shouted, "could you come down here? We have a guest."*

*When Rick got downstairs he found the guest sitting at the kitchen table, quite confused and quite intoxicated. "Rick," Pam said, "do you know Delbert Matson?"*

*"People call me Fuzzy," the man mumbled. "Your wife tells me this is the Lutheran parsonage. You ain't lived here too long."*

*"Just four years," Rick replied.*

*"I'm an atheist," Fuzzy said emphatically.*

*Rick was more concerned about the man's sobriety and the reason for his visit than he was his faith. "What brings you out our way?" he asked.*

*"Best I can remember, I'm headed home."*

*"Where's home?" Rick inquired.*

*"'Bout a half mile south of the Hanson farm on County B."*

*"You must be a neighbor of Marie Bolstad."*

*"Neighbor! I'm her brother. Moved in with her five years ago when Milt died. Horrible thing. That's another reason I ain't a believer. Why'd God do a think like that to Milt? Left Marie with a big farm and no kids to help."*

*Marie Bolstad, a small woman who sat two rows from the back in church each Sunday, always looked tired. Rick knew she was a widow who farmed alone, but had no idea she lived with a brother.*

*Pam asked, "Delbert, I don't see a car outside. How did you get here?" The parsonage was a quarter of a mile from their rural church and over a half mile from the nearest family.*

*Fuzzy looked puzzled, "I was driving when I left The Boondocks. I've really got myself in hot water this time. Marie will be ashamed of me again."*

*Pam looked at Rick with alarm. The Boondocks, a seedy bar, was more than six miles away. Shifting subjects she asked, "Who would like coffee?"*

*"We both would," Rick answered. Pam was surprised. Rick had never drunk a cup of coffee in the ten years she had known him. Later she discovered Fuzzy didn't drink coffee either. That night both drank for the sake of the other. As they sat around the table, Fuzzy told his story.*

*His father died when he was 11. After graduating from high school he enlisted in the Navy. A year later he was in Vietnam. Fuzzy's best friend was killed on patrol. "The day they sent him home in a bag I got drunk and stayed that way until they sent me home," he cried. "Right then I decided not to believe in God anymore. And I haven't." For nearly an hour Fuzzy poured out one bitter story after another.*

*When Fuzzy seemed more alert, Rick took him home. Marie came to the door and cried, "Fuzzy, every day you find a new way to embarrass me."*

*The next morning Rick helped Fuzzy find his truck, by the side of the road, the gas tank empty. They got it gassed up and waved good-bye.*

*That night as Rick stood greeting people at the door for Good Friday services, Rick saw Marie accompanied by a small man in a suit. It was Fuzzy. As he entered the church he whispered, "Don't get your hopes up. I'm doing this for Marie." The sermon was based on the words of Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Rick said the cross was a place of loneliness for God, who lost his only Son. "The cross is a sign of God's solidarity with all the abandoned of the world."*

*By Saturday morning everyone knew the story of the pastor's Thursday night visitor. "Heard you worked late Thursday night," Milt Disrud said as Rick entered his store. Before he left town, a half dozen people stopped him to tell a Fuzzy story. A kind and gentle man before he went into the service, Fuzzy was radically different when he returned from Vietnam.*

*On Easter, Fuzzy was in church again. "An hour listening to your nonsense is a small price to pay for peace at home," Fuzzy told Rick.*

*Rick told the story of Easter from Mark's gospel, stressing that the angel told the women: "Tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him just as he told you." Rick said, "even though Peter and the disciples betrayed and denied Jesus he kept his promise to them. Easter hope is even for those who deny God."*

*After a few days break following Easter, Rick was back in his office at the church. He saw an old pickup turn into the parking lot. It was Fuzzy. He headed into Rick's office and took off his cap.*

*"I know you took aim at me last Sunday, but it didn't work. I still don't believe. God is cruel. He lets too many good people die." He stared at the pastor, letting his words sink in.*

*Rick spoke. "Fuzzy, I don't know what you experienced in Vietnam, but I know you've been mad at the wrong person for a lot of years. I wasn't taking aim at you in my sermons, but this I'll tell you, your heart wasn't the only one that broke when your friend was killed. The cross is God's way of participating in all the pain in this world."*

*Neither man spoke. Then Rick said quietly, "I expect that someday you'll face God when you face yourself, including your drinking."*

*When he got home that night Rick told Pam, "I'm afraid we've seen the last of Fuzzy for a while." Rick was wrong. The next Sunday Fuzzy was in church again. The following day he was at the pastor's office again. This time he entered wordlessly and sat down.*

*"I didn't have a very good day yesterday, or a good night either. Part way through church I figured out what was happening. It wasn't you aiming at me, it was God. He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Put your finger here, and put your hand in my side. Don't be faithless, believe.' He didn't say it once, but over and over to me and Thomas."*

*Rick interrupted, "Who is Thomas?" Fuzzy looked surprised. "You know, the disciple. Finally, about midnight both of us, me and Thomas, took him up on his offer and stuck our hand into his wound. Before you could blink, me and Thomas said it together, 'My Lord and my God.'"*

*The man began to cry. "I'm ready to get help, please."*

*Two days after he left the pastor's study he entered a detoxification program. He was ready. He stopped blaming God for all his sorrow and suffering. He faithfully*

*attended AA meetings. Over the next twelve months he began to connect with his community and look for employment.*

*At the end of that time, Rick approached his new friend with a request. “The story of Thomas is the gospel again for the Sunday after Easter. I wondered if you would be willing to read it in church.”*

*Fuzzy responded immediately. “It has become my favorite story. Yah, I’ll read it.” Then he smiled and said, “And while I’m up there I might say something else. I might say something about amazing grace and the Lord’s offer to turn from doubt to faith. Maybe this year someone else will put his hand in the Lord’s side.”*

Friends, struggle and doubt are built into the life and community of faith—God calls us to grapple with them honestly—and yet... to expect the unexpected. Sometimes in times of our greatest doubts, Christ himself appears, inviting us close. He is always at our sides, waiting for us to touch him, waiting to hear us exclaim, “Oh my Lord and my God, I believe!”