

Faith Mennonite Church  
May 1, 2011  
Easter 2: Turn to Jesus, Go with the Spirit  
Joetta Schlabach

### **Confessions of a Doubter**

*1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31*

My name is Joetta and I am a doubter.

But that doesn't keep me from being a believer. I am a person of faith who has doubts and I imagine that I am in good company here! Walking by faith does not fully dispel the doubts. It allows us to walk with God even as we carry our doubts.

Doubts are a product of the mind, of the intellect, but that is only one part of who we are. In the western world, we favor and privilege the intellect above other ways of knowing. But we are not simply our minds. We are body and we are soul/spirit/emotion. As a person of faith I am learning to listen, to see, and to know with my whole self, body, mind and spirit.

Now the mind is a powerful thing, for which I am grateful. But the mind can also be limiting, even in its most healthy state. Like a computer, it processes what we ask it to process. If we dwell on our doubts and our questions, our mind will gladly re-process them. So I may disappoint those who looked at the sermon title and thought, "Ohhh, we get to hear all about Joetta's doubts!"

I'm sure that my doubts are quite ordinary, most likely the same doubts that many of you contend with. I'd rather not dwell on them. Confession can mean two things: it can mean the "fessing up" the "telling all" kind of acknowledgement—the stuff of tabloids and Fox News. It can also mean a positive acknowledgment, as in our "confession of faith." This morning I would like to confess the things that help me to walk by faith even as I live with doubts.

**The cloud of witnesses/the communion of saints.** I don't know what brings each of you to this worship gathering each Sunday, but one of the things that draws me is the tangible experience of being part of a community that has existed over time and that is connected to the very earliest experiences and memories that are recorded in scripture. We would not be here, in this way and with these words, if someone in each generation didn't have an experience of faith that drew them to share it with their children and those around them.

Some in our community enjoy tracing their genealogy. There's something powerful that draws us to learn where we've come from, what our family patterns have been, whether there's been scandal or achievement. We feel good if we can go back four, five, six or seven generations. But when we enter and become part of the Christian community, we are automatically grafted into a heritage that stretches back to Moses and Miriam, to Abraham and Sarah. And any of us who do not have ethnic Jewish roots are brought into this heritage through Jesus, whose death and resurrection blew wide open the doors to a new community of the Spirit.

I don't know how to explain the resurrection. Each of the four Gospels treats it in a slightly different way. But what I do know is that it sparked a movement that gave people courage to endure suffering and to live in generous love and hope. It enabled the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter to observe: "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1:8-9).

**The presence of Christ comes when we least expect it.** In our Gospel passage this morning, we find the disciples huddled behind locked doors. They were not in a believing mode. They were fearful and surely they were questioning, if not outright doubting, the testimony that Mary Magdalene had brought—that Jesus was alive. Two of their own had seen the empty tomb, but this alone did not give them courage to go out and search the places where Jesus had been. No, they stayed inside. They stayed locked in themselves and with themselves.

But that didn't keep Jesus out! All of a sudden he was there in a visible, palpable way. He spoke the same words, "peace," that he had spoken before his death. And despite the fact that they scattered when he was crucified; despite the fact that even now they were not expecting him, he not only came to them, but he breathed his Spirit on them, commissioning them to carry on the work that he had done—to forgive and release people from the things that bind them.

We cannot will our doubts away, but we can be willing to receive the unexpected. Last Sunday Tyler spoke of receiving an unexpected gift of the Spirit when he was in the Congo. This week a friend relayed a beautiful story of an unexpected work of the Spirit in a Kinko's copy shop. A friend of hers had made copies of the program for the memorial service of a family member who recently died. The man who died was an artist and a poet. The family had placed one of his paintings of Lake Superior and several of his poems in the memorial service program. The person who made the copies inadvertently left the original in the copy machine. She returned the next morning, the day of the service, to pick up the original. A middle-aged gentleman was working at the counter. When she showed him a copy of what she was looking for he said, "I don't usually look at things that get left in machines, but I read the program and I was so moved that I wrote a poem in response." He showed her his poem and asked, "Can I come to the service and share it?" He indeed went, having had no contact with this family prior to finding the program. After the service he told the minister, as my friend was standing nearby, "I'll never be the same again."

**Finally, I believe in the power of ritual actions that shape us and speak to us beyond words.** In her book, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion*, Sara Miles tells the story of walking past an Episcopal church in San Francisco one day and feeling drawn in, as if by the pull of a magnet. Entirely secular at the time, separated by a generation from grandparents who had been persons of faith, she joined the stream of people who were in the aisle going forward for communion. She didn't know what she was being drawn to, but as she received the bread and wine, something stirred within her. Soon she was not only receiving the Bread of Life for herself but leading this established, proper church, in opening a weekly food shelf for the poor of the city. Breaking bread converted her and became her act of faith.

Today we gather once again, at the table. We take ordinary bread and juice pressed from grapes. We do not eat and drink enough to fill our physical hunger and thirst, but these gifts of the earth, when they are shared in reverence and with thanksgiving, remind us of God's love for us in Jesus, and they connect us with the worldwide communion of faith, which celebrates this same meal. In this way we are filled and our faith is renewed.