

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, we celebrated the resurrection and observed John's presentation of Jesus in the garden by the empty tomb.

Again, we should take note of Jesus' post resurrection behavior.

Instead of seeking revenge, claiming temporal power or even *scaring* those who put him to death, Jesus calmly and gently hangs out with his friends and followers. This interaction is also in today's text.

Yet, questions need to be asked, such as why didn't Jesus use the "shock and wow" power of the resurrection to chase away his enemies?

He could have had a lot of fun putting the "fear of Jesus" in the hearts of Herod and others.

And, why did he merely present himself to his followers?

What did they need to know,.....see..... and understand?

Good questions..... Good and necessary questions....

To learn and grow, we need to ask good questions.

Kids! Did you hear that?

AskGood questions!

You have heard it said that there is NO such thing as a bad question.

Well, that statement is wrong. There are bad questions, and the problem with bad questions is that they yield bad answers.

Here are some examples:

There was a soft spoken guest speaker who asked the audience, "Will you please raise your hand if you can NOT hear me?" []

Nobody did, so he assumed all could hear.

This is a bad question to ask a toddler, or maybe any child, "Do you want to go to bed, now?"

When the doctor grabs your swollen ankle and twists it, causing you to scream out, and then asks, "Does that hurt?" That is a bad question.

Then there was the truck driver who thought his extra tall trailer would fit under the bridge. There wasn't enough clearance, and it became wedged under the bridge, causing much visible damage to the trailer.

The RCMP officer came up to the driver who was scratching his head and looking up at his rig, and the officer asked, “Are you stuck?”

The driver, turned to the officer, rolled his eyes, and responded, “NO, I’m just delivering a bridge.”

This past week, the Star-Phoenix newspaper had an article about how we can’t trust our instincts in our modern, hi-tech world. [4.5. 2010]

It noted that our innate longing for relationship is a reason people get attached to TV shows with the smiling and attractive actors,..yet, instead of getting a real relationship, they are connected to a television set.

Another example was that we tend to be more shocked and terrified by horror movies, such as with a giant gorilla, than we are about the news of global warming. We instinctively fear big animals – predators, which really are no longer a threat to us.

This misunderstanding of our internal drive is especially true with food.

Thousands of years of humans living in near starvation have imbedded a drive in us for fats, salt and sugar. The problem now is, that those items are NO longer in short supply.

Therefore, we should NOT ask ourselves, “Do I want a donut from Tim Hortons?” That is a bad question.

Instead, we should ask, “Does my body need more fat and sugar?”

The problem with Bad questions is that they yield bad answers.

This is especially true and damaging in the realm of theology and religion.

Superstition and myths are usually based on results of bad questions and the absence of good research.

When religious people ask bad questions, then fear, arrogance and ignorance inflame passions that lead to bad actions, such crusades, inquisitions and persecution.

Even in the day to day of Christianity we hear of bad questions, such as:

“When is the end / the judgment coming?”

Or,... “Do you believe every word in the Bible is true?”.... or... “When exactly did God create the world?”

Too often, the questions are limited in scope and designed to give a simple answer – a Yes and no answer.

Such a when Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the Messiah?”

What is granted by such simple answers, except the empowerment to judge / to classify and separate.

If the pursuit is to get an answer, then we humans will likely settle on an answer? And, bad questions will render answers—bad answers.

Moreover, if our pursuit is to find answers, then we'll settle for easy answers to bad questions, and then.... the journey for understanding ends.

Too often, people come to church hoping to only get answers, instead of striving to grow in understanding and a relationship with God and each other.

We are called to live by faith, and not certainty. Therefore, we should be people comfortable with questions. Growing in faith is reaching out beyond the comfort zone.

Are we People searching, following and striving to grow and learn?

Then we are people comfortable living with questions, YET>>>>we Must base our decisions and choices on something more than speculation and hope..... or we could end up heading in the wrong direction, following something/ someone other than Christ.

Without the measure of sound reasoning, then we could become victims of a charismatic cult leader.

???

This tension rises from our text: which is how to be confident in Christ / in a healthy relationship with God, ...and still have doubts?

How much should we leap out on faith and to what extend do we rely on common sense?

And, when do we use those “Good Questions?”

*This is the age old struggle of FAITH AND REASON.

Should we proceed with faith, accepting the lessons and challenges taught for generations and assumed to be true by popular culture, and then use Reason to make sense of it all?

Or,..... should be first check the facts and details, and then fill in the gap with faith?

Augustine insisted that faith must come first, and then.... we'll understand the truth with reason. He asserted that we have to believe, then we can use our logical minds to make senses of it all.

This position sounds like, “God exists, and now struggle with and decide how much God controls things.”

Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas proclaimed that it is REASON first.

In his opinion, we have to know, from good analysis, and THEN have faith to believe.

This position sounds like, “Consider how creation and events are folded together, truly it could not be an accident, now..... then.... leap out and call upon God.”

More recently, Paul Tillich suggested the two— faith and reason are mixed. He presented a kind of interactive “right and left” brain approach.

I’m more comfortable with Tillich because he advocates “Thinking and searching” – using both our soul and mind / our right and left brain,... with... WITH... a bias to reason / analytical thinking.

Therefore, search and ask as we struggle with faith, too.

In other words, Tillich supports doubting. So, put him in the group with doubting Thomas..... and that is fine.

Tillich even stated, “We cannot discover truth without doubting and asking questions.”

In addition, he warned that suppressing doubt leads to fanaticism or cynicism.

Frederick Buechner once said, “...if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Doubt abounded after the resurrection of Jesus, and today’s passage tells of Jesus presenting himself to respond to those doubts/ those questions.

Jesus “appeared” with his disciples, and showed them / proved that he was really himselfand risen from the dead. He showed them his pierced hands and side.

The disciples rejoiced. They were satisfied, and.... *as we know,.... discovering / receiving answers.... is satisfying*, YET.... the answer did NOT / does Not end the journey, but is simply a step on the way.

After they rejoiced, the scripture tells us that Jesus empowered them with the Holy Spirit and SENT them,.... just as he had been sent.

**Remember this exchange: first there was an answer to a question, and then a call to be faithful – a call to have faith, which lead to more questions.

Thomas wasn’t present at the time, and in all fairness to Thomas, he too wanted an encounter with the Risen Christ, in order to believe.

Thomas wasn’t content with accepting the disciples word about Jesus. He wanted to experience Jesus, too, and he did.

Jesus came to Thomas, responding to his doubt, and Jesus showed his scars—to see and touch. Thomas fully experienced Christ and believed.

In Thomas’ writings, from the Gospel of Thomas, he affirmed the reward for his search for truth when he said, “What is hidden...will be revealed; for there is nothing hidden which will not be manifest.”
{log5-8:12}

As I noted, I like Tillich’s idea that faith and reason are a blend; however, I understand it as blend that is in progress.

I understand “Faith and Reason” as an on going process, happening over and over again.

I see it as steps, as on a stairway.

We use our best higher level of analytical thinking to ask good questions.... to bring us to a point of making a sound decision.... similar to deciding to lift a foot to place it on the next step of a stairway. The direction comes from “Reason”—the lifting of the foot, but the REAL movement comes with faith..... because at some point, we must put our foot down and trust that the step will hold our weight. Until we do that, there is only good intentions in the right direction, but NO true movement. By faith we shift our weight and proceed.

The challenge, as Jesus mentioned, is for those who do Not have the opportunity to physically touch Jesus.

It is a challenge, but it is also a blessing because with faith comes the Holy Spirit who helps us move on. Yet, Reason got us to that point.

Even so, reason will only take a person so far.

For example,

The disciples did go out proclaiming and living as Jesus asked them to do. They shared that they witnessed the risen Christ and they preached what they learned, and many chose to accept and take the next step on faith,..... but many more decided not to believe or not to step up in faith. And, the same pattern happens today, too. Many choose not to accept the explanations and the witness of followers, and many decide not to risk proceeding on faith.

All the pieces don't fit together, *we'll at least I haven't figured out all the answers to the puzzle yet*, and that is where faith comes in. Faith is putting that foot down and shifting ourselves upward, trusting God will sustain us.

On the other hand, if we rely on faith alone—blind faith, then we have no idea where we are heading.

So, ASK GOOD QUESTIONS. Always ask good questions, and keep asking them. The journey continues, and so does the need for good questions.

The journey: this brings us to verses 30 and 31 of John 20, which reveals that the Gospel account did NOT try to present Jesus' life story / his biography. The Gospel account is NOT merely about the life and times of Jesus. The intent of the book was to give us enough information and direction so that we would believe that Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of God,...”, and we can't even do that unless we ask good questions to what is in print.

We have to clearly understand... AND.....

The second part of the stated purpose for the Gospel account is..... once, we believe who Jesus truly is, then..... WE can live the way of Christ / the way God's calls us to be.

A name embodies the person, so when the Bible states, “In the name of Jesus”, then we are to recall the person – the whole person/ the whole story.

In other words, the purpose is to believe—this comes by reason / lifting that foot,..... and then living the life – putting the foot down on the step by faith.

The journey is about living with God in a good and healthy relationship as Jesus did. Our Faith and Reason journey—our purpose is about living... and less about getting into the here after.

The sermon title is “Stairway to Heaven.”

And,... the answer to that Good question you are thinking is.... NO, the title is not in reference to a worn out Led Zeppelin song, and it is NOT about how to get through the pearly gates.

But, I’m glad you were thinking that question, because I wanted to answer it with Luke 17:20, where Jesus stated, “...the Kingdom of God is among / within you.”

I’m not an expert on the “here after”, but I do believe Jesus when he proclaims that God’s domain is now.... with us / in us.

And, based upon how Jesus lived and talked, life is about relationship, relationship based on respect, awareness, trust and love.

Life is about being in a trusting and loving relationships, esp. w/God.

Jesus’ relationship with God and others bears this out, even after his resurrection, Jesus nurtured his relationships.

Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus was God’s amen to the life and message of Christ. Yes, to living peace, justice, grace and love, and yes to preaching Christ’s way, too.

And, Yes, to growing / moving forward, upward in our relationship with God, as Jesus demonstrated, even after the resurrection.

Actually, I didn’t say anything new this morning. I just tried to explain what most of us have already heard and accept, with the added admonition to ask your own good questions.

However,..... the tricky part is the rest of the step..... and that is WHAT to do when the answers run out.

Reason / knowing will only go so far.

Sorry, there really were not any answers in today’s sermon, just a prod to ask good questions, such as What is holding me back from finishing my step.... and following Christ?