

Flying high with faith

I recently had the joy of spending February back in my homeland with some of that time spent in London with my son Matt and as part of the weekend of birthday celebrations for me he decided I could come and watch him in action. So Sunday afternoon I found myself in a huge warehouse building where for two hours Matt and his circus training classmates scaled the heights to a tiny platform high above me before launching out into space swinging from a trapeze bar.

Catching hold of the trapeze bar itself was no mean feat as it meant holding on to the platform railing with one hand whilst stretching out with the other to catch hold of the bar as it was pulled towards them.; Then came that moment when to secure the bar with two hands meant letting go the safety of the railing and leaping off the platform. For a few that moment of letting go to fly forwards stirred up some uncertainty and their faces revealed a mixture of doubt and fear, yet let go they all did even if for a couple that meant a fairly quick drop to the safety net below.

For those more experienced like my son there was an even greater challenge that of swinging upside down holding the bar with your legs before, at the right time, flying out away from the bar with arms outstretched reaching out to the catcher swinging towards them. A tough call and many didn't make it, but in trying certainly gave it their best effort. Witnessing my son flying high and being caught by the catcher was delightful, especially knowing he first signed up for such training to overcome his fear of heights.

The late theologian Henri Nouwen told of the thrill of meeting the trapeze artists The Flying Rodleighs. They invited him to come and watch one of their training sessions this in turn led to a developing friendship between them. One day when discussing flying the leader of the team explained "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump." He went on to say, "a flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him." Reflecting on this in one of his books Nouwen wrote, Trust is the basis of life. Without trust, no human being can live. Trapeze artists offer a beautiful image of this. Flyers have to trust their catchers. They can do the most spectacular doubles, triples, or quadruples, but what finally makes their performance spectacular are the catchers who are there for them at the right time in the right place.

Hesitancy, doubt, fear and ultimately trust are all hallmarks found within today's gospel reading from John. In one short week we have moved from the glorious news of resurrection to a locked room in the evening where the disciples of Jesus are huddled together in fear and uncertainty unsure I suspect of where next to go or what to do.

Then, according to John's gospel narrative the risen Christ is suddenly there among them in human form showing the marks of his crucifixion offering a blessing of peace and then commissioning them to continue God's ministry to the world. Swiftly the mood of the disciples changed from being one of imprisoned by their apprehension and fear to a renewed sense of energy and elation as once more their leader is there in person close by their side equipping and guiding them in readiness for their ultimate leap in faith.

In John's resurrection narrative there is a follow-up to Jesus' appearance to the disciples in that upper room as John's account has the disciples back in the same room together a week later, this time though Thomas who had been absent on the first occasion is with them.

We all know the story of Thomas and have heard many times his expressions of doubt upon hearing second hand from the others of Jesus first appearance. Thomas, who has been forever dubbed doubting Thomas, was unconvinced that Christ was indeed alive and wanted more concrete evidence.

Before taking this further let's explore a bit of the background of this account. Some seventy years had passed since the crucifixion of Jesus before the writer of John's gospel crafted the story. It was a period of great uncertainty and fear when both Jewish and Gentile Christians were suffering extreme persecution from the Romans. As proclaimed Christians they risked their very lives and many were fearful and sought refuge, hiding from sight of those who sought to harm them. During this period many would have been unsure and doubtful of the faith they had embraced.

When taking John's account of the fear and doubt that those first disciples would have felt against the conditions of the time of writing the Gospel, it is perhaps understandable why the author felt it important to include the story of Thomas within the resurrection narrative.

Returning to Thomas and the doubt and disbelief he felt at being told Christ was alive and well despite being crucified, dead and buried, would we I wonder have been any different in our responses? How many times do we experience doubt and disbelief at something we have heard? How many times have we wrestled with our own Christian beliefs? And last but not least is being doubtful a bad thing?

The author of *Doubt- the Prelude to Faith* the Rev. William Self wrote,

“There is a place in the Christian life for honest doubt, for doubt is always the prelude to faith. Before Gideon was able to be used by God, he cried out, "If the Lord is with us, why has this befallen us?" or Job, who in his struggle cried out, "I cried unto you and you do not answer." Jeremiah, of course, cursed the day that he was born. Never let us forget that Jesus on the cross cried out, "My God, My God, why?" No one really possesses his faith until he has fought for it.”

He went on to describe doubt as like a front porch, all of us have to go through it before we get into the house of faith.

Whilst accepting as Christians living in Aotearoa we don't daily face the fear of persecution and death, we do, I suggest, live with the uncertainty of the 'what if' doubts that surface from time to time either personally or collectively when we consider any form of change. Yet truly living the gospel narrative of resurrection in our daily lives amidst the turbulence and uncertainty that living within our global community brings involves being bold enough to launch out into the unknown.

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Jesus is apt to come, into the very midst of life at its most real and inescapable. Not in a blaze of unearthly light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in the throes of some kind of religious daydream, but...at supper time, or walking along a road...He never approached from on high, but always in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks”.

Real and inescapable would have been an apt description of the reality Rita Nightingale found herself in some years ago. Wrongly imprisoned on a false drugs charge in Thailand Rita was forced to work long arduous hours

in the prison factory. Later, in a radio interview, she recalled her Christmas spent in prison.

‘I had only been a Christian for three weeks. I had been given a song book with carols in it and I remember I took it and put it on my sewing machine in the workroom. There was so much noise coming from the machines and Thai music being played, that no-one heard me as I sang carols, noticing, for the first time, the words’.

For Rita despite her voice being drowned out by the noise as she sang those Christmas carols those words of peace and hope filled her mind and embraced her soul releasing her from the bondage that held her allowing her to fly free trusting in the catcher that all would be well.

As I begin to conclude, let’s pause and reflect on our Easter journey. We have witnessed again the pain and suffering of Jesus, his journey to the cross, his death, and the resurrection glory and saw afresh the challenges ahead for those early Disciples of Christ. We held up crosses, waved palm branches and renewed our baptismal vows

So what now? How do we begin to actively live out the resurrection?

There is a quote that says, “Every journey starts with a single step.”¹

Matt and his team mates didn’t attend that first circus training class ready and experienced enough to simply grasp hold of the trapeze and fly off without a care in the world, they did though take that first step towards the unknown.

¹ Lao Tze

Then, as they grew together as a team, supporting and encouraging each other under the careful guidance of their trainer and catcher, they embraced their fears and doubts, climbing the ladder to the tiny platform high above, ready to experience time and time again the joy of conquering the unknown and the exhilaration that comes with flying free.

So are we ready to start climbing the resurrection ladder and take some risks acknowledging there will be times when we would rather stay inside, shut the doors and lock out the world. Yet the reality is every time we withdraw from life's engagement we run the risk of imprisoning ourselves from the glorious opportunities open to us.

Once again Easter with its momentous sunshine of promise is calling all of us to lean out; grasp hold the bar then pushing aside the 'what ifs' launching out flying high with faith!

Amen.

Chris Frazer April 2016