

## Conspiracy Theories

If you keep up on the news, you might have heard about 61 yr-old Mike Hughes. He drives a limousine in California for a living, but his mind works like someone from Missouri – the “Show Me” state. Mike does not want to be thought of as gullible. If you try to tell him something, he will say, “Show Me!”

I don’t know this for sure, but when he was a little kid, I imagine that he went to school where some of his classrooms had a round globe to show where all the nations and continents were located on the earth. The science teacher probably talked about the earth as if it were a round sphere – hurling around the sun.

But Mike was not about to have that teacher make him look like a fool, so he pushed back – saying that he was pretty sure the earth was not round at all, but that it was mostly flat -- shaped more like a frisbe. He had never been anywhere in his life where the earth looked anything but flat. Even the sea.

You know how it is when people keep repeating the same nonsense over and over – they begin to believe it. If somebody questions them, they see a conspiracy (probably a government conspiracy). Mike Hughes came to the realization that the earth was flat. He believed it and his friends went along with him. He joined the Flat Earth Society, where everybody knew this to be the truth. They have a very slick website, and a nice graphic image of the flat earth, with all the continents laid out so viewers can see them all at once.

The things we say to each other matter. If we repeat falsehoods often enough, some people will believe them as absolute truth – and reject any evidence offered to the contrary.

In the last year or two, we've seen an increase in that kind of thinking – where **if** the information presented doesn't conform to one's own ideology, it's dismissed. Over time, it can become harder for some percentage of people to discern what's true. America loves conspiracy theories and alternative views of reality.

All of which brings me to this morning's readings. (The second reading was just a continuation of the Doubting Thomas narrative in the first reading.) What I love about Doubting Thomas is his willingness to ask the question nobody else saw a need to ask. He said, "Show me!".

"Jesus is alive!" they said.

"Oh yeh? SHOW ME! He said.

In the second part of the story, Jesus appears to him in the flesh and invites Thomas to put his doubts to the test. "Here; examine the holes in my hands and touch the wound in my side."

Thomas takes the challenge and exclaims, "My Lord and My God!" He got a chance to test his hypothesis. The story suggests that he got the proof he needed.

A couple of things about that transaction:

1. Doubts can be a good thing, because they are a doorway to discovery for many people. Honor your

doubts, and you are more likely to find an answer. If you go through life afraid to ask the question that's been bugging you forever, you're probably not from Missouri. Go ahead and explore. You'll make discoveries that make you stronger than ever.

2. It may be a detail, but someone in the Thursday Study group noted that we can learn to know someone more deeply by touching them where they are wounded. Probably not talking about physically touching them, but allowing another person the safe environment to share what causes pain. Jesus invited Thomas to know his wounded self – and the words of joy burst out of Thomas' mouth. Our opening prayer reflected this.
3. It's always wise to read these stories for their deeper meaning – not for literal facts. The story was written down some 70 or 80 years after the events they describe, and like every interpretation, the passing decades – and translation into other languages and cultures changed and enriched it. The story is true, even if it never happened exactly as described. Read it for meaning, not for historical or scientific facts.

Over the past week or two, I've had some conversations with another man named Thomas. He's the project manager for the crews who are cleaning and restoring our church after the January 3 fire.

We talk about church things once in awhile. He is has dropped away from his religious roots – mainly because of the scandalous behaviors by a number of the clergy. (You may have an idea of which particular religious roots I’m referring to, but don’t. What’s true in his tradition has been true in every other tradition, too).

After one of our chats, I invited Tom to write down a few of his own questions – about Christianity – about God, about the institution of the church – whatever he wanted. I said I would use them in this morning’s sermon as an example of how great it is to put our questions and doubts into words.

The next morning, I got this text from him:

*Good Morning, Chuck*

*I have been doing some thinking and have come up with the following wonders I have.*

*I’ve always wondered how the story of Jesus came to be and how amazing it’s been to be continued on for thousands of years. When you look at today’s world, I often try to relate back to how the story began.*

*As we’ve talked about how both the birth and death of Jesus are truly amazing stories and again I’ve asked myself many times how the story came to be and how it’s been passed on.*

*Lastly, the miracles he performed that are written in the Bible are mysteries that make one think ‘how could this really happen?’*

*That answer, I'm guessing, lies in the faith that one has of his or her religious beliefs in today's world.*

*Thanks for the chats, and be sure I'll have the Chapel back to you very soon.*

*Tom.*

Right away, I told Tom about our Awakenings conference – because our main speakers address those questions head on – and in an entertaining way.

These kinds of conversations bring out something in me that reminds me of ministry with confirmation classes and campus ministry. At that age, questions and doubts come easier. And each one is an invitation to explore the truths that invite our discovery.

I've been to Missouri, although never long enough to experience that "Show Me" trait. But if Doubting Thomas is an example of what it means to ask questions and express doubts, I'm loving it.

Mike Hughes doubted the assertion that the earth is round, so he built a small steam-powered rocket and blasted himself off into space to get a first-hand look. Unfortunately for Mike, his rocket rose only about 1800 feet, nowhere near high enough to get a good look at our globe. But aren't we glad that some people have the courage to test out their assumptions?

And how about ourselves. I wonder if some of us hold to a belief in a flat Christianity? What would that be like? What would a "Flat Christianity Society" be like?

Have we tested our assumptions by actually asking question – or blasting off into new dimensions of thought? In my way of thinking, God wants us to ask questions, explore ideas, and challenge doctrines that don't give life.

Churches that place power and authority on a pedestal have sometimes made it difficult to ask questions. But being human is about exploring ideas and taking risks on behalf of others. We were never intended to carry someone else's doctrine without testing it. Providing it leads to honest exploration, doubt can be a blessing. The moment you open up to your doubts, you become stronger; your faith become more alive. Just think of Doubting Thomas. He named his doubt, touched the wounded Christ, and found his truth.

May we hear this as an invitation to do the same!