This morning we are going to play the opposite game. I say something and you say its opposite. I say “Up” and you say… “Down.” I say “Happy” and you say “Sad”. “Open” “Closed” “Dark” “Light”, “Big” “Little”, “Faith” “Doubt?”

The temptation for us, our inclination, is to see doubt as faith’s opposite. However, doubt is still an engagement with God that God uses, to great effect, throughout scripture. The opposite of faith is faithlessness, failing to act according to our convictions. One of the best examples we find in scripture was in our gospel lesson a few weeks ago in John, which parallels our passage today. In that passage the disciples were huddled behind locked doors even though Jesus had already risen. They failed to have the courage to trust, which resulted in complete inaction on the part of the disciples. Our passage this morning describes perhaps the same event but draws different truths for us.

Once again, as Jesus enters their midst, the first thing he does is to offer them his peace. The disciples are afraid. They think he is a ghost! Then he shows them his hands and his feet, after all ghosts don’t have flesh and blood. Then comes that intriguing phrase from Luke, “While in their joy they were disbelieving.” This phrase I think captures so much of the essence of our faith. It was in this state of joyous disbelieving that they were finally able to understand Jesus’ teaching. He unfolds Old Testament prophecies and you get the sense that, this time, it was sinking in.

Notice that before they understood, prior to an intellectual agreement, they felt the joy of knowing the risen Christ. In fact this joy, this encounter with the risen Christ, seems to be a prerequisite for understanding and acceptance. First comes our encounter with God and then comes our belief.

I think the divine encounter is necessary, prior to belief, because God is so much bigger than we can comprehend. We cannot find God in a mathematical proof.

The disciples disbelieving in this midst of the joy, of having Jesus right in front of them, might be something like Charlie Bucket’s first glimpse of that last golden ticket - the ticket that children all around the world were hoping to win, so they could enter Willy Wonka’s amazing chocolate factory. As a boy I was absolutely enthralled with this notion of slowly tearing away this wrapper to see a little glimpse of gold. I even got goose bumps as I considered it. Charlie holding that golden ticket, rubbing it between his fingers, as he went over in his mind that there was no way he could win it! And yet there it was! There was no way they would ever see Jesus again! Yet there He was! The odds are too ludicrous!

This is why God cannot be comprehended or accepted apart from a golden ticket encounter with God. It is simply too absurd.

I like to think of myself as a person of science. I love to read popular books on string theory, biology, quantum mechanics, geology, and more. Besides the enthralling concepts they include, I am fascinated and somewhat in awe of the brilliance of scientists who can piece together seemingly disparate facts like puzzle pieces that when properly assembled make a clear picture. The great scientific insights almost always fly in the face of accepted views of the world so it takes a type of intellectual integrity and courage to make these leaps. But when made, they make such plain sense of the facts that one is compelled to believe.

But there is another aspect of this world and life in general that, to me, is even more
compelling, that discloses even deeper truths of the world and our place in it.

Mystery.

Einstein himself believed the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.

In an article entitled, “The opposite of faith isn’t doubt, its certainty” Jesuit thinker Kevin O’Brien muses on the importance of mystery. He first acknowledges that Thomas’ insistence to touch Jesus’ hands and side as proof of his resurrection is a perfectly normal human response. Perhaps Thomas wanted to believe his friends but it sounded too desperate and deluded and so he wanted to use his senses, as we all do, when we seek to understand reality. But we cannot stop there.

O’Brien writes,

We live in a hyper-rational ... society where many assume that things not observable by physical senses and not understandable by the human mind either don’t exist or have no importance. ... But Christians are called to go beyond the limitations of our physical senses, and to experience another reality: the reality of God’s presence and active involvement in our lives.

Jesus gave the disciples proof of His resurrection and it led them to slack-jawed amazement, the “joyous disbelieving” Luke describes. This experience is the acknowledgement that even in the midst of seeing God right before us, there is a mystery and wonder that is beyond our full knowing.

So without Jesus showing us His hands and His side how do we come to embrace this mystery?

C.S. Lewis wrote, “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” We may not see the risen Lord but we see all the amazing light He shines. Jesus reassures the disciples He is not a ghost by showing His hands and feet; by eating. How are we convinced that Jesus is not a ghost? Not a wispy figure of our imagination but real, powerful, active, and alive? Ghosts don’t leave footprints but God does. Everywhere.

Just like Jesus ate that piece of fish for the disciples’ benefit, He sometimes leaves footprints in strange places for ours – like home appliances.

As a single mother of four boys you can imagine that at times money was tight. At one point all five of us, me, my three brothers, and mom were in schools with tuition. One particular week we weren’t sure where gas and lunch money were going to come from. It wasn’t a dire situation, the next pay check would come soon, but nonetheless money was scarce. So of course we decided to do laundry. The first load produced a dollar bill, a few pennies, a dime, and perhaps a quarter. It must have come from my jeans I thought. The next load was about the same with a few more dollar bills. As we moved through several loads of laundry the money kept coming. By about the fourth load we were checking our clothes thoroughly in advance of washing them for any spare change. It didn't matter; the money kept coming. I even considered re-washing some clothes but thought that might be pushing it! In all I think we netted about $25. In this case the money helped. Along with paying for some gas and lunches, instead of Charlie’s chocolate bar I think I bought a Reese’s cup. But it is still a golden ticket mystery of God’s providence even to this day, a gift of God’s love.

There are many aspects of discipleship that require hard work. But this joyous disbelief requires nothing but awe. God reaches out to us in love and sometimes walks through walls or makes money from a washing machine to give us hope. To me it’s something like watching Jordan Speith’s Master’s victory a few weeks ago.

In this life we think we are trying to be Jordan Speith trying to win the Master’s of faith, but Jesus is the victor. We are to be the Jim Nantz, the announcer who gave the play-by-play describing the astounding feat Mr. Speith accomplished. Remember no matter what happens, God has already won the victory!