

April 7, 2013
2nd Sunday in Easter
Dr. Stephen C. Brewer

“FAITHFUL THOMAS”

Acts 5:27-32 Revelation 1:4-8 John 20:19-31

Poor Thomas! Truant on Easter Sunday, he will not accept the witness of the disciples. He stubbornly refuses to learn the first lesson of faith. He is spiritually dense; a skeptic; a Doubting Thomas... a common and popular understanding, but false.

Thomas did doubt; but do you think his doubting was bad? Was it a weakness and a sign of little faith, or could it be something healthy? Do you think doubting might even be an important part of faith that is strong?

One of the most common concerns people have when they come to me for spiritual direction is that they think they are losing their faith. They may say, “I can’t pray anymore;” or “I’m afraid I don’t believe in God now.”

Ironically, almost 100% of the time what is happening instead is that their faith is growing or their belief in God is growing, and the old concepts and ideas they had used for their faith or their understanding of God are too small now. What they are experiencing is something like a snake shedding its skin. When the snake grows it would die if it didn’t slough off its old skin. For a time it is more vulnerable; it is exposed and unprotected. But this is not the end for the snake; it is a time for growth and renewal. In many ways this is the function of doubt; when we are truly open to the movement of the Spirit in our lives, when we are attentive and open to God there will come times when we must set aside many of the beliefs that may have provided us with comfort and security in the past. We must make room for a larger understanding of God.

Author Oliver Sacks writes this about his religious experience beginning when he was a child before World War “When my mother lit the Sabbath candles, I would feel, almost physically, the Sabbath coming in, being welcomed, descending like a soft mantle over the earth. But when I was suddenly abandoned by my parents (as I saw it), my trust in them, my love for them, was rudely shaken, and with this my belief in God, too.”

He continues to write about an experiment he came up with to prove God’s existence:

“I planted two rows of radishes side by side in the vegetable garden, and asked God to bless one or curse one, whichever he wished, so that I might see a clear difference between them. The two rows of radishes came up identical, and this was proof for me that no God existed. But, I longed now even more for something to believe in.”

This makes me smile because I remember doing something like this when I was a child. Sometimes we get the idea that the best way to see if God exists is to give God a little test. We may ask God, “If you really exist then make all the lights green on my way to work;” or, “God if you exist please let me get a return on my taxes this year;” or maybe “God if you exist then let my father live through this surgery;” God if you exist please let me get an “A” on my Algebra test.” I think God forgives us these indiscretions, as we would for our own children. Sometimes God even answers as we ask.

But I think we are off track if we think of Thomas in this way — trying to “test” Jesus; making the resurrected Jesus prove that he really exists. If we look closer we will see that

Thomas was no more a doubter of Jesus than were the other disciples.¹ Thomas' doubts, you see, were much less about Jesus than about the word of the disciples.

In fact, what really distinguishes Thomas from the other disciples is not his doubt, but the fullness of his confession of faith. His simple words; "My Lord and my God" are perhaps the highest point of John's gospel. Thomas never doubted Jesus.

When Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem the disciples thought that it would be certain death for all of them. Surprisingly, it was Thomas who said: Then let us go so that we may die with him. It was a courageous statement, and a measure of his true faith. Hear his statement of faith from our reading today again: "My Lord, and my God."

Not teacher. Not Lord. Not Messiah. But God! Did you know that this is the only place in all of Scripture where Jesus is called *God* without qualification of any kind?

Doubting Thomas, yes. But the problem was not Thomas' doubt; it was the disciples' lack of credibility. The sad fact was that this group of scared followers and recent deserters, who still locked their doors, did not present a convincing sign of faith. Thomas wanted to see Jesus; what he saw in the other disciples did not inspire faith.

Unbelief is a real problem in our secular age. The church, which used to be the engine and chassis in the lives of the majority of folks in this country is now, apparently, merely an optional accessory.

We may look at our secular society and the space available in our pews and wonder why people lack faith. What's wrong with these folks that they don't want to come to church? We may think of these nameless non-churchgoing folks like the church has thought of Thomas: as doubting and unbelieving.

But here is another way to think about the problem. Maybe those of us who do attend church regularly are like the other disciples; maybe the non-churchgoers are not so much without faith in God as they are unconvinced and uninspired by us. Maybe we could do more to live in such a way that we reflect Christ's grace and mercy and love so that others want to "come and see."

Let's take an easier example. We can all think of someone who has chosen to "fall away" from activity in our congregation. There are many reasons people give for this; and most of the reasons seem valid. In response—more often than not I think—we tend just to shrug our shoulders. Maybe we feel a little resentment that they would lose interest in something so important so easily. It's hard to know the right thing to do; but I know one thing it is much easier to be indignant than self-critical.

I wonder if maybe some of those whom we assume do not have much real faith are actually like Thomas; they want to be disciples and members of a church, but they are not attracted to a tame or domesticated gospel; they seek Christ, but they simply cannot see him in *us*.

I know that's a very hard thing to think about, but I really believe that's what John is placing before us in this story of Thomas.

Here's another way to think about it: In the 13th century, when the Venetian traveler Marco Polo came back from the Orient, he told stories of wonders he had seen and marvelous cities he had visited. Because these things were far beyond the imagination of his people, they began to accuse him of lying. Finally, they ridiculed everything he tried to say. When Marco Polo was dying at the age of 70, they asked him to confess his lies, since he was about to face God. His last answer amazed those who heard him. With a half-smile, he whispered, "I never told you the

¹ Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:11, 38-41

half of it.”

What makes a believer and a vital member of a community of faith? When it comes down to it it's almost always some one's loving concern which makes the difference; it is almost always the way a person's undeserved and unexpected mercy or forgiveness or even hospitality which makes the presence of Christ real and convincing.

I believe the real truth is, exciting programs or great preaching or groovy music or enlightened Church doctrine are not the things that bring people in these doors and keep them here. You see, Marco Polo had the last laugh, but maybe he made a big mistake by keeping so much of the wonder of his travels to the orient to himself. After all, in the end, his friends still didn't believe him.

I wonder what would happen if we did better than show people “the half of it” when it comes to the love of Christ. Our treatment of each other and the way we live out the values we see in Jesus' life and ministry are the most powerful thing we have going for us; because nothing is as attractive or as sweet or as full of joy and satisfaction as a taste of the love of God. And we have that to give.

Grace, Mercy and Peace. Amen.