

Reasonable Doubt

John 20:19-31

April 19, 2009

I.

Today is a special day at St. Thomas for two reasons. First, after the service we will have our spring clean-up to which you all are invited even if you don't have a work assignment. We will erect the cross in our memorial garden that's under construction, and the Mens' Breakfast Group will be at the grill for its traditional tasty burgers and hot dogs. So, just come and relax.

The second reason is that today we also remember someone who is pretty important around here. Today's gospel is about our patron saint, St. Thomas the Apostle.

What do we know about Thomas? Today's reading is one of the most well-known stories of Thomas, but he is mentioned several other times in the New Testament. We don't actually know from the Bible what eventually happened to him. But the church's ancient tradition says that he, and all the other disciples except John, went out into the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and eventually were killed and became martyrs.

And Thomas' story is that he was the only one to go beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire at the time. He became a missionary to India where he founded the church and finally was killed by the pagan priests who feared that he was converting too many people. And today, Thomas is held in very high regard by the Christian church in India.

II.

So, let's look at what today's reading says about Thomas. It began with the evening of Easter day. It was the day of the resurrection, and all the remaining disciples, except Thomas, had locked themselves in a room because they feared that the Jews who had condemned Jesus soon would come for them.

We don't know why Thomas was not there. Perhaps he was not as afraid of the Jews as were the rest of the disciples. Or, alternatively, perhaps he did not want to be seen with them. That part of the story only can be speculation.

But, in any event, even though the doors were locked, the resurrected Jesus appeared and stood among them. And later, when they told Thomas about it, he was not ready to believe. He said he would not be convinced until he was able to touch Jesus' wounds from the cross.

This reminds me of the boy whose mother asked what had learned in Sunday School. "Well, Mom," he said, "our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to break the Israelites out of prison. When he got them to the Red Sea, his engineers built a pontoon bridge, and all the people walked across safely. Then he radioed headquarters and called in an air strike. Bombers came and blew up the bridge, and all the Israelites were saved."

Then his mother said, "Is that really what your teacher taught you?" The boy replied, "Well, no, Mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"

Thomas also did not immediately believe the truth of the resurrection. In later times during the church's history this led to the term "doubting Thomas." And here, I believe Thomas got a bad rap. Some used him as an example of a person whose faith was weak, and whose expressions of uncertainty should be avoided.

But that's not the case. All he basically said was, "I'm not ready yet to believe you guys, I want a reality check." That was not lack of faith; but rather normal caution. After all, the resurrection

only happened hours earlier, and there still was a lot of confusion about it. It would be natural for someone who was not in the room to be skeptical of the disciples' story and want further proof.

In fact, the other disciples also probably did not believe until they actually saw Jesus walk through the wall and heard him speak to them. So Thomas actually did not demand any more evidence of the resurrection than any of the others.

Then gospel reading fast forwards one week. The disciples again were back in the room, and this time Thomas was with them. And Jesus appeared again, and saw Thomas. Now, we might think that Jesus could have said something like "Well, Thomas, fancy seeing you here." And Thomas might have said "Gulp."

But that is not what happened. Jesus did not criticize Thomas, but simply told him to stop doubting and to believe, and he offered Thomas the chance to touch his wounds. The reading does not say that Thomas did so, for his doubts evaporated immediately. Thomas recognized him as his Lord and his God, on the spot.

And then Jesus said, and this is an important part of the reading, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Here Jesus was not only talking about people living at the time, but also people for all time.

III.

So, in some ways the story is not really about Thomas, but rather about Jesus' grace in meeting Thomas where he was. Instead of questioning Thomas' faith, Jesus gave Thomas the chance to show his faith. He invited him to touch his wounds because that was what Thomas said he needed.

In the same way, Jesus meets us where we are in our lives. He does not impose any litmus tests. We don't have to go to church for a certain number of weeks before he will reach out to us. We don't have to say exactly the right kind of prayers before he will respond. All we have to do is be sincere, and ask, and he will be there to answer.

We all probably have had questions about our faith at some time or another. The trials and tribulations of life can lead us to wonder where God is in some of the things that happen. Sometimes we're up, and sometimes we're down, and sometimes we just don't seem to care.

That makes no difference to Jesus. Even if we close the door, Jesus is still there. A locked and closed door was no barrier to Christ's entry into the room in today's gospel when he brought peace and comfort to people who did not yet even understand the resurrection. For us today, who do have that understanding, we still can draw strength from the fact that he is right outside any doors in our lives that we might have closed and locked.

And Thomas did not have our advantages. Back then, he and the other disciples did not have the benefit of Scripture and history. They actually were living it as it unfolded. The Gospels had not yet been written, there was no organized church, and Paul had not yet been converted on the road to Damascus. They all were a little uncertain, and Thomas was no exception.

But today, things are different. We know what happened, and we know what it means for us. We know that if we invite Jesus to come through the door and into our lives he will do so.

IV.

Today's gospel describes the human condition. In some way or another, at some time or another, we all can doubt. Or in an instant we can falter and fail. It can be a moment of anger,

or greed, or prideful arrogance, or a moral lapse. It can be something that hurts another, or it can be something known only to us—and to God—that separates us from godly obedience.

But God wants our faith because he loves us. And more importantly, he accepts our doubts as he accepts us. Just as with Thomas, he wants us to believe, and just as with Thomas he will meet us where we are to draw us closer to him.

So, Thomas' story is our story. The disciples' story is our story. It's the story of God's disciples in every age, and it tells what it means to be Christians who move between faith and doubt. We all live in the uncertainties that trouble this fallen world.

But we are not without resources along the way. We always have God's sustaining love, and grace, and power. In that we find our faith. And through our faith our doubts, like Thomas' doubts, will disappear. *Amen.*