

The Second Sunday of Easter: Holy Trinity Church: April 24, 2022

John 20: 19-31

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

My dear sisters Brothers and my Sisters in Christ, If I were to mention the names of certain disciples to you and ask you to write down the first word that comes into your mind, it is unlikely you would come up with the same words.

If I were to mention the name of Judas Iscariot many of you would write down the word betray but not all of you. If I were to mention Simon Peter, some of you would write down the word faith, impetuous, but not all of you. If

I were to mention the names of James and John, some of you would write down the phrase Sons of Thunder, but not all of you. But when I mention the word Thomas, there is little question about the word most everyone would write down. It would be the word, doubt. Indeed, so closely have we associated Thomas with this word, that we have coined a phrase to describe him:

“Doubting Thomas.”

You may be interested to know that in the first three gospels we are told absolutely nothing at all about Thomas. It is in John's Gospel that he emerges as a distinct personality, but even then, there are only 155 words about him. There is not a lot about this disciple in the Bible but there is more than one description.

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, yet we don't remember him for that. We also fail to point out that in this story of Thomas' doubt we have the one place in the all the Gospels where the Divinity of Christ is bluntly and unequivocally stated. It is interesting, is it not, that the story that gives Thomas his infamous nickname, is the same story that has Thomas making an earth-shattering confession of faith? Look at his confession, "My Lord, and my God." Not teacher. Not Lord. Not Messiah. But God! It is the only place where Jesus is called God without qualification of any kind. It is uttered with conviction as if Thomas was simply recognizing a fact, just as $2 + 2 = 4$, and the sun is in the sky. You are my Lord and my God! These are certainly not the words of a doubter.

Unfortunately, history has remembered him for this scene where the resurrected Christ made an appearance to the disciples in a home in Jerusalem. Thomas was not present and when he heard about the event he refused to believe it. Maybe he was the forerunner of modern-day cynicism. Maybe the news simply sounded too good to be true. Thomas said: Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands I will not believe.

Now I cannot help but notice that Thomas has separated himself from the disciples and therefore, in his solitude, missed the resurrection appearance. I think that John is suggesting to us that Jesus the Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call the church, and when we separate ourselves from the church we take a chance on missing his unique presence. But the story doesn't end here. The second time Jesus made his appearance Thomas was present with the disciples and this time he too witnessed the event. This time he believed. So, what can we learn from the life of Thomas?

First, Jesus did not blame Thomas for doubting. So often the church's handling of doubt is to couple it with disbelief and squash it. But Jesus never condemned Thomas. I think that he understood that once Thomas worked through his doubts, he would be one of the surest men in all Christendom.

I must admit that I am dubious of people who say that they have never have any doubts, people who always seem so sure. I would suggest to you that any person who places himself beyond doubt, places himself above Christ himself. On the cross Jesus cried out, “Father, why have you forsaken me?” At a given time in history, even Jesus had doubts.

Authentic faith always begins with intellectual honesty, and doubt is the bedrock of honesty. Put it another way: Faith is not the absence of doubt; it is the overcoming of doubt. I have had doubts. I have been standing by a graveside on an icy winter day when a bitter cold wind chapped my face. I have heard the cries of families who have lost someone closer than life itself, and I have thought silently to myself: Is it all true? Is resurrection reality? Are the scoffers correct? Is it all simply ancient myth designed to get us through the night? But then I am reminded that it was Alfred Lloyd Tennyson who said: “There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds.” So, we find ourselves crying out, as did the disciple off old: Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.

Secondly, we can learn from the life of Thomas that the most endearing things in life can never be proven. Jesus said: Thomas, you have believed because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen yet still believe. I don’t

know how that makes you feel but it is of great comfort to me. Jesus is talking about me. I will never see Jesus in this life. I will not have the chance to put my finger in the nail scars. I will not get the chance to touch his pierced side. It will never be proven to me that he was raised from the dead. Jesus understands it's harder for me to believe than for Thomas and he counts me blessed. But let me ask you: How can you conclusively prove the qualities of love, friendship, or faith? How can you establish beyond a shadow of a doubt your devotion to your children? Show me verifiable evidence that love exists. The cynic can always dismiss acts of love on your part as attempts at self-love, or the need to control people. How can you prove to someone that you love your Holy Trinity Episcopal Church?

If the goal of your life is for someone to show you a photograph of God, then you will be forever disappointed. Let me tell you, what happens when we live in a purely rationalistic world, one where miracles are removed from our way of thinking. It happened to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson ranks as one of our nation's greatest intellects but not many people know that he rejected the notion of miracles. When he approached the scriptures, he could not tolerate those passages, which dealt with the supernatural. So, what did he do? He wrote his own bible. In the Thomas Jefferson Bible you will find only the moral teachings and historical events of Jesus' life. No virgin births. No

healing of Jairus' daughter. No walking on water. And, no resurrection. Here is how his bible ends: "There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulcher and departed." For Thomas Jefferson the Gospel ends at the foot of a grave.

It is very easy to rewrite history. To say, "that did not happen." But the story remains that the disciples were witnesses to these events. Thomas Jefferson is calling the disciples liars and that they continued throughout the first century, for 70 years, to propagate those lies. Furthermore, Jefferson's Bible has been robbed of its power. I am convinced that the church does not accomplish 2000 plus years of life inside the walls of a closed dark sepulcher. There is no power in that dark place; rather, the Church is alive because Jesus is alive forevermore. What we must understand is we had better leave some room for mysticism in our worldview. That does not preclude science. That does not preclude reason. What it does mean is that the most important things in your life will never be conclusively proved. You will, on daily and even momentary basis, need to live by faith.

If someone could in fact come along and scientifically prove the resurrection, then you would be living your life by fact and not by faith. But, let me suggest something to you that I firmly believe. Even if a loved one who has been dead

for years were to come back to life and tell you about the realities of heaven, and God, and resurrection, you would not believe it. You recall the story Jesus tells about the man who is in hell and the other man who is in paradise. The man in hell wanted to come back to earth for a few moments to warn his friends and family about the torments of hell in the hopes of scarring them into right living. He hoped he could keep them from suffering the same fate. Jesus said, that even if he were to return to warn his loved ones they would not change their lives. And it would not change your world in the slightest either. God has called us to be the people of faith. What exists in heaven cannot be proved on earth; it must be believed.

And so, we learn from the life of Thomas a third lesson: We must move beyond doubt to faith. It is all right to doubt, but in our discipleship, we should move beyond doubt. Jesus admonished Thomas, “Stop doubting and believe.” Unbelief is a normal part of life, but it is not healthy to remain in unbelief. In the early days of John Wesley’s ministry, he was racked with doubts and uncertainties. So, he went to his old friend and mentor Peter Bohler and laid his soul bare. When I first read Bohler’s response to Wesley in the seminary, I thought that it made no sense at all, but over the years I have grown to understand the wisdom in it. Bohler told Wesley: “Preach faith till you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.” In other

words, act as though you have already moved passed doubt to faith and because you are acting it out it will eventually come to you.

So, here is the challenge for this Second Sunday of Easter, you know, when we come to worship on Sunday morning we come to see further, to see Durham Cathedral. When we gather in worship we come to see into the heart of God. I want to say something to you this morning, and in doing so I say it to myself as well. There are times in our lives when we face grief, or disappointment, or pain, or depression. There are times when these things happen that our hold on God falters. When these moments of true, deep doubt come let, me urge something upon you. It was once told to me and it has gotten me through many dark nights.

And if you remember nothing about this sermon this morning accepts this thought, NEVER DOUBT IN THE DARK, WHAT GOD HAS TOLD YOU IN THE LIGHT. NEVER DOUBT IN THE DARK, WHAT GOD HAS TOLD YOU IN THE LIGHT. I say this because it is in moments of spiritual light, that God shows us true reality. These moments of spiritual light are so very important, because they allow us to get through many dark nights of doubt and despair, that come into the lives of every single one of us.

In moments of light, God has told you that he will never desert you. Don't ever doubt that.

In moments of light, God has told you that resurrection is reality. Don't ever let the darkness cause you to doubt that.

In moments of light, God has told you that the very hairs on your head are numbered. Don't ever doubt that in the darkness. AMEN.