

Second Easter, 2011
St. John's, Roanoke

The Rev. G. Thomas Mustard

A man was blissfully driving along the highway, when he saw the Easter Bunny hopping across the middle of the road. He swerved to avoid hitting the Bunny, but unfortunately the weight of all that candy and the other goodies packed in his bag made it impossible for the Bunny to move very fast, so he hit the Bunny and the basket went flying all the road and down over the bank. Colorful eggs, jelly beans, fake grass, and all kinds of other candy now covered the highway and the hood of the man's car.

Being a sensitive man and an animal lover, the driver stopped, pulled over to the side of the road, and got out to see what had happened to the Bunny. Much to his dismay, the Bunny appeared dead. The driver felt awful and very guilty. Being the sensitive type, he began to cry.

A woman driving down the same highway saw the man crying on the side of the road and pulled over. She stepped out and asked the man what was wrong.

"I feel terrible," he said. "I accidentally hit the Easter Bunny and I think he's dead. There may not be an Easter because of what I did. What should I do?"

The woman told the man not to worry. She knew exactly what to do. She went to the trunk of her car and pulled out a spray bottle and walked over to the limp Bunny and sprayed the entire contents onto the furry little creature.

Miraculously, the Easter Bunny sprang up, jumped up and down a few times, picked up the spilled eggs, jelly beans and candy, waved his paw at the two humans and hopped down the road. About 50 yards down the road the Easter Bunny stopped, turned around, and waved. He hopped another 50 yards, stopped, turned, waved, and hopped another 50 yards and did the same thing. He did that until he was completely out of sight.

The man was astonished. He said to the woman, "What in heaven's name was in that spray can of yours? What was it you sprayed all over the Easter Bunny?"

The woman turned the can around so the man could read the label. It said: "Hair spray. Restores life to dead or injured hair. Adds permanent wave."

Sadly, for a lot of folks that is the Easter story. As you can see, for a whole host of people resurrection is defined as an event and not so much as

a state of being. The culture tells us that Easter is over and for many church people Easter has become a day and not a season.

The lectionary reminds us that Easter begins the 50 great days of joy. God's great reversal and the trick God pulled on the devil lasts more than just one day. Every day, from now until Pentecost, is Easter. It is always a bit sad that now, just one week away from Easter Sunday, some of our members are unsure of when the resurrection is going to be. Easter joy can be difficult to sustain. The church calls this "Low Sunday."

Today's Gospel gives us an opportunity to be honest about our post-Easter letdown. Yet it also reminds us that our faith, our hope, is not of our creation. We have joy and confidence because the risen Christ comes and stands among us and this day.

The risen Christ appears to his disciples (except for Thomas), breathes eternal breath on them, and gives them his peace. Then he commissions them to do the same work that he has been doing, giving them the Holy Spirit as a guide and counselor, and thus empowering them with the same power which characterized his ministry in the world. He also gives them the awesome power to proclaim forgiveness of sins in the name of the Father.

All these gifts are rather amazing considering that these are the same disciples who proved singularly unhelpful at the cross and considering that all they have to show for themselves now is their huddling behind locked doors in fear. Yet to these faithless, fearful, and utterly ordinary folks, people a whole lot like us, Jesus gives his commission, his spirit, and the power to forgive. It's all rather amazing and a wonderful word to hear in the post-Easter doldrums.

The Gospel portrays the disciples, the first followers of this itinerant, Galilean traveling preacher, as those who had serious questions, real fears, and lagging commitment. One of them, Thomas, the one whose name I have carried for 67 years, had deep doubts. Obviously, many in this congregation, including this Thomas, have doubts. Sometimes we attempt to stifle our doubts, to lay them aside, and to not think about them. But they are there and will find a way to get expressed. The doubting, inner voice asks, "What if the whole thing was just manufactured in the Upper Room by a creative bunch of first-century snake-oil salesmen?" "What if it's all just wishful thinking?" We are sometimes told that to have questions and doubts means we're bad Christians. Those fifty people who were confirmed and baptized this past April 10th will have doubts and questions as they live

their Christian lives. I do pray that we will refrain from laying a “guilt trip” on them when those doubts and questions come up.

Fredrick Buechner, contemporary author and gifted theologian, once said, “If you don’t doubt, you are either self-deluded or asleep.” Psychologists and educational theorists speak about the importance in the educational process of “cognitive dislocation,” that territory where we are moving from one cognitive position into new and unexplored territory. In our church, when we baptize people, we pray that the newly baptized person will have an “inquiring and discerning heart.” I would suggest that honest doubt is an essential requirement for such a heart. Buechner also said, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith, they keep it alive and moving.”

And yet, perhaps it is too much of a cop-out to say that doubts are merely a helpful part of the faith process. Doubt can be much more painful than that. It is painful, in those moments when God is less than we wish God to be. There are those times when we cry out and there seems to be no response. It is a natural desire at those times to want things to be sure and certain.

Jesus taught his disciples that if they had faith, even a small amount of certain faith, they would be able to move mountains. But most of us do not wish to move mountains with our faith. We merely want to keep going, to put one foot in front of the other, to have hope in the midst of difficult circumstances. We probably can identify with the longings of Thomas. We believe, but we need help with our unbelief. We’ll believe it, when we see it. Sometimes we are all from Missouri.

In the Gospel, the good news is, Jesus gives Thomas what he needs. He moves toward Thomas, showing him his wounds, giving him the evidence that Thomas needs. That is true of the scriptures. That is especially true of Jesus.

From time to time I’ve heard folks talk about this parish, the ups and downs, the high points and the valleys of doubt and despair. One of them said, “When you think about the troubles we’ve had, the things we’ve been through, it is a testament to the power of God that we’re still here.” I would want to affirm that view. It is a testament to the power of God and to the resurrection that we’re still here. Never forget! We may be the only evidence some people ever see that God raised Jesus from the dead.

So, let this Low Sunday be a time when we are honest about our doubts and the weaknesses of the church and those of us who minister and worship here. But, also let this Sunday be a time when we are equally hopeful about

the potential of people who have been visited and blessed and breathed upon by the risen Lord. People like you and me. Then we may well join Thomas in saying, "My Lord and my God!"

It has been a singular privilege for me to have been a member of the staff at the remarkable parish. Shirley and I have loved being a part of the vibrant life here and soaking up some of the Holy Breath of God that is so much a part of what is going on in this place. You will be in our thoughts and prayers and very much loved. Amen.