

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")
April 15, 2012

<p>The Second Sunday of Easter Revised Common Lectionary John 20:19-31</p>

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In cases of criminal law, the “burden of proof” rests upon the prosecutor. This means that the prosecutor must prove her case, whereas a defense attorney need only cast doubt on the prosecutor’s claims.

In cases of civil law, where one party sues another, and there are no prosecutors or defendants, the burden of proof is harder to assign. The United States Supreme Court addressed this question in 2005; Madam Justice O'Connor writes the opinion: "The [burden of] proof with regard to most facts...should be assigned to the plaintiff who...seeks to change the present state of affairs..."¹

In other words, someone who petitions an American court to change the *status quo* must be ready to prove her case.

Had St. Thomas the Twin been given the opportunity, he would have voted with the majority. Jesus Christ rose from the grave, and the nature of reality was forever changed. But, Thomas insists that Jesus prove his case.

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It was early that Sunday morning when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. She expected to find Jesus’ body, and to weep out of love. Instead, she found nothing, and she wept in disbelief. Mary was devastated until Jesus appeared to her and called her by name. In St. John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the Resurrected Lord, and it is she who breaks the news to the disciples.²

Later that same night, the disciples were gathered for dinner. As the friends of a crucified insurrectionist, each one of them was *persona non grata* in Jerusalem. For their mutual safety, they kept the doors barred and the windows shuttered. No one could get in. No one could find them. But, someone did find them. Jesus found them, evaded their defenses, and appeared in their midst saying, “Peace be with you.”

For some undisclosed reason, St. Thomas the Twin was not among the disciples that night. He did not get to see the Lord, and when the disciples shared the news, he refused to believe: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, [no, no, unless I] put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

¹ Schaffer v. Weast, 546 U.S. 49 (2005), citing McCormick §337 at 412.

² Summary: John 20:1-19

Thomas dug in. Thomas placed the burden of proof squarely on Jesus, and he would not budge. If Jesus wanted Thomas to believe that death had been vanquished, then Jesus was going to have to prove his case. And, prove it he did.

A week later, the disciples were back in their high-security bunker, and Jesus once again wriggled his way: “Peace be with you.” Jesus lets Thomas touch his wounds, and the doubting disciple falls to his knees: “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus satisfies St. Thomas’ burden of proof, and meets his standard of persuasion. But, Jesus will go on to say that the only ones who are truly blessed are those who believe even without having seen.

Jesus will appear only once more in St. John’s Gospel, and the Bible contains no record of Jesus coming back again after he ascends to the Father. With a few post-resurrection appearances, Jesus rests his case for all eternity. From the day of the ascension, until that wonderful day when Christ returns in the fullness of his glory, faithful Christians will be left to believe without having seen.

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I am not all together pleased with the prospect of living out the balance of my earthly life believing but not seeing. I can all too easily identify with the disciples. I have all heard the news of the resurrection, but the tiniest kernels of doubt still remain: Is it true? Did it *really* happen? What does it mean?

How I long to be like Mary Magdalene, and hear Jesus call my name in the garden. How I long to be like Thomas the Twin, and touch Jesus’ wounds. How I long for God to appear in person and satisfy *my* burden of proof, *my* standard of persuasion. But, this is not faith.

Our rector reminded me of something last week that bears repeating: Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Certainty is the opposite of faith.

The disciples were scared. They weren’t certain what all of this meant. They feared the future. They doubted the truth. So great was their fear that they barricaded themselves in a locked upper room and prayed that no one would be able to find them.

But, someone did find them. Jesus found them, and he said in the midst of their uncertainty, “Peace be with you.” In the midst of their doubt, “Peace be with you.” In the midst of their paralyzing fear, “Peace be with you.”

With these four simple words, Jesus rests his case. Jesus has changed the *status quo*, satisfied the burden of proof, and left behind the testimony of credible witnesses. There is no longer any reason to be afraid.

Our challenge of faith is not proving the truth of the resurrection. Our challenge of faith is finding the courage to let down our defenses, and to allow the risen Christ to speak over our doubts and over fears the same words of hope that he spoke over the disciples: “Peace be with you.”

Amen.