

Easter 2C
John 20:19-31

Well, here we are – the week after Easter Day – and it's time to bust on Thomas again. If I were to mention Thomas in any other story about the disciples, someone might say, "Oh, Doubting Thomas, right?" That's how we know Thomas' role in the cast of characters throughout the Gospels. He's the doubter. He's not the only doubter when it comes to Jesus' resurrection. In three of the four Gospels, all the other disciples doubted the women who reported that Jesus had risen from the dead. We discount their doubts, though, because they doubted the messengers – the women. Women tell "idle tales," as some of them said. They really didn't doubt the message; it was totally the messengers. So we understand and forgive their doubts and don't point them out the way we do Thomas'.

But Thomas was the last one to see Jesus so he gets the bad press. In this case, the messengers were his brother disciples – why would they tell idle tales or lie to him? Only women did those things. But still he did not believe. *Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*" Finally Jesus appears, holds out his hands for Thomas, Thomas looks at him, and blurts out his statement of belief, *"My Lord and my God."* Jesus responds with a somewhat troubling statement, *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

I don't think the statement was nearly as troubling for his followers as it can be to us. No one in 2000 years has seen Jesus. We have second and third hand accounts but we don't know how trustworthy they are in reporting what actually happened. And, in our post-enlightenment, digital age, actually believing that Jesus is God incarnate can be questionable for us. That leads us to question the incarnation and the facts around the resurrection. Some of us will admit that he probably existed and that he was obviously a good and wise man, a prophet and a teacher. But to go any farther than that is to require us to turn off our brains and believe something that is actually quite fantastic.

Because we haven't seen him and we have no proof of his resurrection or his divinity.

We are Episcopalians, after all. Our tradition tells us that we approach faith in the form of a three-legged stool. A leg each for tradition, reason, and scripture as we progress on our spiritual journey. Like the other two apostolic traditions, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, we also rely on our sacred writings and on the tradition – the experience – passed on to us by those who came before us. But unlike the other two apostolic traditions, we have determined that reason is crucial to our understanding of scripture and tradition. Reason mediates between the two and insists that we question what we have been told and what we read. We are not to leave our brains on Makiki and Wilder when we walk on this campus. We bring our brains with us and use them in our faith and our spiritual journey.

It would be a lot easier if the church would just tell us what to believe. Oh, we do have a 14-page catechism at the back of our prayer books that is an outline of our faith – pages 849-862. With a few exceptions, every question of faith is answered by one sentence. After that, we're to use our reason to discuss and expand on those answers – both alone and in conversation with others, using scripture and tradition as our primary but not only sources. On the other hand, a paperback version of the Roman Catholic Catechism has 756 pages that include 2865 paragraphs of statements of faith that includes expansion and explanation of each item to be believed. So the catechism does a lot of your reasoning for you. There's much less room for doubt that way and you know where the authority lies – who's in charge.

We may question ourselves when we hear and see and talk with those who are more fundamentalist in their Christian faith or in their atheism. Yes, there are fundamentalist atheists. Both groups believe they have the entire and only truth – or facts – and that we Episcopalians don't know what we believe, believe the wrong things, or are just silly and empty-headed and foolish because we believe anything at all. These are approaches that fall in the right or wrong, black or white, proof or no proof, losers and winners

understandings of life. That's why we sometimes find ourselves stammering when we try to explain what it means to be an Episcopalian. We do have beliefs with which constantly struggle, we do take the Bible seriously as our collection of sacred writings but we do not take it literally, and we do accept our traditions as long as they help deepen and further our faith and spiritual journeys. Most importantly, we know that we do not possess all of the truth about God or the universe, but we know we possess some of the truth – just as others do. We do not belittle others because their beliefs or non-beliefs are different than ours.

But we Episcopalians insist that we use our own reason in concert with others in the community as we struggle with our own faith and the statements of the church. We – meaning the church – make some assumptions about the beliefs of our members, about those who call themselves Christians in an Episcopal community. But realistically, we know that people belong to the Episcopal Church for many different reasons – some having nothing to do with walking a journey of faith. For some tradition is the driving force, for some scripture is the driving force, for some not being forced to do or think anything is the driving force. For some, it's all about community. So for many, it's bits and pieces of who we are as Episcopalians that keeps us here for as long as we need to be here. But if we are intentional about our journey of faith, then we address that journey with the tools of scripture, tradition, and reason in the context of a community of faith.

Like Thomas and all of his buddies, we're not perfect and we have doubts. We don't hear with our ears or see with our eyes or listen with our hearts. Although we try to bring all of our faculties to our faith journeys, we don't always succeed. But we know we're on an intentional spiritual journey with which we must continually engage. That's what it means to be human, and that's what it means to be Episcopalian.

Like the followers of Jesus – male and female – we come together in community to address issues of faith, to worship the creator together, and to be intentional about our identities as Christians. Our journeys are not done alone. It's in community that we struggle with beliefs and doubts and faith and life. It's in community that we learn about and discuss scripture and tradition and use our reason to understand how our developing faith affects our lives. So it's important, too, that we know one another, that we feel comfortable with one another, and that we even trust one another at some level. This was one of the issues with Thomas and the rest of the disciples. He had been with them for all of the time that they had been with Jesus, shared the many different experiences, and had become close friends. But Thomas doubted the veracity of what they had told him about the risen Jesus. In today's language, he questioned the honesty of his BFFs. (*Best friends forever*) In a close-knit community like that of the followers of Jesus, that lack of trust can be destructive to the foundation and the life of the community. Even in a faith community where we're not all BFFs, there still has to be some level of trust that provides sufficient safety to discuss issues of faith. And that level of trust has to permeate all of community life. We don't have to like one another, but we need to practice the agape love that includes respect, compassion, integrity, and civility.

Just like the disciples, we don't always get it when it comes to Jesus and God. Just like the disciples, we have our doubts and we don't always believe what we see and hear – even though the source might be authoritative and even trustworthy. Just like the disciples, our faith and trust in the creator and Jesus Christ, isn't always strong and dependable. But just like the disciples, we know that we are imperfect, that we don't have all the answers, and that we struggle in community, but that we continue to respond to the longing of our spiritual selves and to the one who has given us life. That's what Thomas did. He continued to engage and be with his doubts about Jesus and he ultimately believed. That is our constant journey – to engage, to question, and to believe.

Amen.

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