

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON—Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

APRIL 23, 2017

2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 2:14a,22-32 JOHN 20:19-31

PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Lord and help us to know you better. AMEN

I think everyone loves the story of “Doubting Thomas”. It is one of very few that appears every year in the lectionary, not once in the 3-year cycle as most Gospel stories. As I was wondering why it was so popular, one answer that came to me was that it is a dramatic individual personal encounter with Jesus and therefore more likely to get our attention. Other examples are the blind man, the Samaritan woman at the well, Nicodemus, Martha, Peter. Some come to belief, some still hesitate, but with Thomas, he comes to belief suddenly and totally, after open resistance, and he goes on to make a statement that is the strongest possible about Jesus. Not only does he call him Messiah, but he calls him “My Lord and MY GOD”. This is the highest thing that can be said about Jesus and it is very rare indeed in Scripture. Another thing that might make us treasure this

story is that maybe a lot of us have “been there”. A few years ago it used to be fashionable to make fun of people when they weren’t convinced of something right away and call them “doubting Thomas”, but that seems to have gone out of fashion, maybe because fewer people are reading the Bible these days. One final observation on why this story is popular: I think many of us, like Thomas, have had real doubts about Jesus and/or God, and we might have been afraid of what people would think of us if we express them—and here is Thomas speaking right out to the disciples—and then Jesus comes in and appears to have heard him, because the first thing he does when he mysteriously enters the room a second time through locked doors is to address Thomas directly and tell him to do exactly what Thomas said he needed to do in order to believe!.

The other disciples didn’t make fun of him, in the Gospel anyway, and they really shouldn’t have. They themselves needed some convincing too, as things turned out. I noticed in today’s first reading from Acts that, when Peter is preaching the good news of the resurrection on Pentecost Day in Jerusalem, he reminds his

audience: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed...” In other words, they all had had lots of evidence of Jesus’ divinity, but it wasn’t enough; they still failed to believe, allowed him to be crucified, and ran away in fright. Now Jesus, raised from the dead, begins to appear to them. And again, when Mary brought the news of the resurrection, they did not believe her at first either. Jesus told them to meet him in Galilee. In today’s Gospel we see that they seem to have gone, and he appears to them, entering through a locked door and showing them his wounds, he wishes them peace and says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” The Gospel tells us that they rejoiced when they saw him, so we are sure they recognized him. Then Jesus did something—he breathed the Holy Spirit on them and told them that if they forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; but if they do not forgive, then the sins are retained. The Gospel notes that Thomas

was not there for that meeting, but we do not know why. In any case, when the disciples told Thomas what had happened, he said he wouldn't believe unless he could see the marks on Jesus' hands and put his hand in his side. A week later Jesus returned to them in the same mysterious way he had come before, and this time Thomas was with them. This time Jesus greeted them and immediately singled out Thomas and told him to put his finger on the wound in his hand and put his hand in his side--exactly what Thomas said he needed to do in order to believe! That convinced Thomas completely, even though he had not seen Jesus before, and even though he had not received the Holy Spirit with the others.

Maybe this amazing ending is another reason this story is so memorable.

My favorite part, though, is what Jesus says next. To Thomas, he says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Maybe he is saying this to shame all of them a bit because of their lapse. But I do not think that is why he says this. I love this part because, just as he singles out Thomas and seemed to have come back to see

them again just so Thomas could really see him, I think he says this last sentence for all of us who come after he ascended to the Father, those of us who will never be actually able to see him in the flesh, but will have to see him through the signs and wonders that are still all around us. Maybe that one sentence is there to convince us that, when one of us, like Thomas, need some extra assurance to overcome our doubt, that Jesus will provide a sign for us. Jesus is here assuring us that we do not necessarily have to see Him physically to believe. He will reveal himself to us in other ways, if we simply ask.

John the Gospel writer must have thought this example of Thomas was particularly powerful, because he uses this point in his Gospel (rather than at the beginning or the end of it) to make a personal statement, something that Gospel writers do seldom, if at all. This section of his Gospel ends with the author's statement of why he wrote this Gospel. He says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of

God, and that through believing you may have life in His name". He is speaking through the centuries to us, his readers.

We see in this Gospel how much it actually took for the disciples and even for Thomas to believe, when Jesus was physically present. Perhaps this will help us to forgive ourselves for doubts and come back to belief more confidently. Has John presented enough signs and wonders for you to be blessed and truly believe, or are you still having doubts and waiting like Thomas for some more proof that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for us? Thomas was able to say exactly what he needed in order to remove his doubts and believe that Jesus was Lord and God and enable his to surrender. If you still have doubts, don't be ashamed, but speak out as Thomas did. God answered Him, and he believed completely. What do you need? Speak up and ask for it! Remember, Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive." AMEN