

SERMON FOR APRIL 11, 2021

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord our Savior and Redeemer**

It is the Doubting Thomas story again. I have always disliked this story. Here is a man who spent three years traveling with 11 trusted companions, who were like his brothers, and Jesus himself, who prophesied his death and resurrection. But Thomas still does not believe his companions when they all tell him of Jesus' appearance among them.

What does it take to believe? I have always said I would have hated to have Thomas on one of my juries. After hearing 11 eye-witnesses he still does not believe.

I know there are people who have a different take on the Thomas story. I have heard it said that Thomas was courageous to doubt, and not to try to hide it or be ashamed of it. He tested the truth of it so he could believe in his own unique way. But Thomas was not doubting. He did not have a reasonable doubt. Thomas was stubbornly unwilling to believe. Even after he had heard the man he followed and said he loved prophesy his death and resurrection. He refused to believe.

Now I admit I have doubts. All the time. I have more questions than answers. That is one of the reasons I am at home in the Episcopal Church. It is okay to have doubts and questions. It is hard to believe in the unseen, especially in this fact oriented, scientific world we live in. WE do not have the luxury of seeing the marks on Jesus' hands and putting our fingers in the place where the nails were as Thomas eventually did. Believing takes a leap of faith. And I admit part of my faith is that I WANT to believe. And I must pray sometimes to help my unbelief.

But we do not have to go on blind faith. If we do not hold on too strongly to our stubbornness, we can see Jesus' work in the lives of people we know. We can see the love of Christ every time someone gives shelter to a homeless person. Every time someone gives food to a hungry child. Every time we listen with a non-judgmental ear to someone's pain. Every time someone risks their life and safety for social justice. This is the work of Christ's church, and what explanation is there for this charitable work if not the love of Christ? I can see and feel the Holy Spirit in my life. And scientific explanations for the creation of the universe and the creatures within it, although I accept them, do nothing to make me doubt that there is an ultimate creator who I choose to call God. What causes me to doubt is the hard work it takes to love my neighbor. Christ commanded us to do that, and it is a struggle for me. Sometimes it is all I can do to pray for tolerance and to try not to be judgmental.

There are some things we do not want to believe because they just do not fit into our world view. They do not fit into what we have been told growing up. And no matter how many people tell us things are different from what we have been taught, we cling stubbornly to our beliefs.

We are living in a time now when people of color are crying out for justice. They have been crying out for justice for a long time, but their cries have fallen on deaf ears. Why? Because we did not want to believe that our ancestors were responsible for this injustice. And even if we accept that they were, we do not want to believe that we have any responsibility. We are stubbornly unwilling to believe the cries of our neighbors.

We do not want to acknowledge that we have been privileged in any way. This is America. We made it on our own. I am sure most of you, like me, did not grow up rich. Therefore, we do not think we are privileged.

But let us look at today's reading from the Book of Acts. "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and

great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as had any need."

This was the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught. Far from the world we live in. If the idea to engage in such action is even expressed, it is met with scoff and ridicule. Reparations? Ridiculous! Sell what we own and distribute the proceeds! No way! Why should people who did not earn it be given anything for free! I worked for what I have! This is America! People earn their own way!

Now I recognize people do not want to hear this. It is much easier to come to church on Sunday, try to follow the Ten Commandments, or at least the ones that follow after the command to love thy neighbor as thyself. If we follow those rules, we are doing our part, are we not? Living righteous lives by not committing adultery, or stealing, or murdering or bearing false witness, etc.

Jesus said the most important of the commandments is to love God and our neighbor. Although the laws were important, he was not a stickler for them. Far more important was love. And when he was asked who our neighbor is, He told the story of the Good Samaritan as an example. The Samaritans were the half breed people of Samaria. Outcasts in the Pharisee community. These are our neighbors.

Who are the outcasts in today's America? The homeless, the immigrants, the disabled and mentally ill? Are they the people who are just lazy and refuse to work? Why are so many of them people of color? These are God's people. The people Jesus chose to hang out with. Listen to their stories and I think you will hear something totally different from what you might think.

Listen to their stories just as Thomas could have listened. Be willing to believe. And look around. We do not even have to take the information second hand. It is right in front of us if we are willing to see.

It does not fit into the stories we were told growing up. It does not fit into the “American Dream” story that we are all created equal and if we just work hard, we will be rewarded. It is uncomfortable to hear and easier to reject and not listen to.

But if we are really followers of Christ we will listen.

It is not about just saying I am sorry. I am sorry for what my ancestors did. John the Baptist called us to repent through Baptism. Repentance does not mean to just say I am sorry. It means a change of consciousness and a change in our behavior. We are all sinners. If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (John 1;18). If we say we are Christians, we cannot just shrug our sin off and turn a blind eye to the inequities all around us. Love your neighbor does not just mean the people we see every day. Although I admit for me that is hard enough. It means all humanity.

Let us pray not to be stubbornly unwilling to listen.

Amen