

The Second Sunday of Easter

April 8, 2018

Preached by the Rev. Lisa M. Erdeljon
St Michael's Episcopal Church, Barrington, IL

John 20:19-31

“Do not doubt but believe.”

Oh Doubting Thomas!

It is that time of year, again.

You see, every year, one week after Easter Sunday, which, by the way, is called the Second Sunday of Easter—because, you know, Easter is actually 50 days long...

Anyway, one week after Easter Sunday, we always get this story—this character—this message.

Poor Doubting Thomas!

I'm sure everyone knows who Doubting Thomas is, and I feel bad for the guy, because he is actually one of Jesus's 12 Apostles, and yet, all we really know about him is that he is called “the Twin” and that he doubts the other disciples when Jesus first appears to them after the Resurrection.

In fact, I suspect we connect Thomas with doubting more than we connect him with being a twin or being an Apostle! Or even being the author of a Gospel (although it's not in the Bible, so I can understand if people don't know that bit of trivia about Thomas)

And, I also suspect that each of us can probably relate to Thomas—to not being completely sure or completely convinced or fully swayed to believe something without our own subjective investigation of the evidence.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says, “Do not doubt but believe,” and as he says this, He offers Thomas to see and feel the wounds in Jesus's hands and side.

So at the exact moment that Jesus is reprimanding Thomas for doubting, Jesus is also offering Thomas that much sought after empirical evidence for belief.

What a conundrum!

It's: believe in something without your own first-person witness, but also, here is that first-person witness you wanted.

And Jesus continues: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

It's as if Jesus wanted Thomas to believe and so offered the sensory proof, but also, really hoped Thomas would believe without having to see or feel for himself.

...

I looked up these words in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, in hopes that maybe, while talking about them, I would better understand what Jesus is saying here.

Doubt means “to call into question the truth of; to be uncertain.” It also means “to lack confidence in.”

Thomas is doubting because he questions the truth that the other disciples are saying. He lacks confidence, not so much in Jesus, but more so in the other disciples.

“To be uncertain” of the Resurrection, is perhaps part of what Thomas is dealing with, but the doubt he has—what he calls into question—is more about the other disciples having “seen the Lord.”

After all, as the Gospel says: Thomas “was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’”

Unless Thomas actually sees the wounds—the evidence of death—he will not believe the other disciples that it was Jesus who appeared among them.

Here's another definition: “believe,” in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means, “To consider to be true or honest;” “to accept the word or evidence;” or even “to accept something as true, genuine, or real.”

So Jesus tells Thomas, “Do not doubt”—do not call into question what the other disciples are telling you—but “accept the words or evidence” as “true, genuine, or real.”

Jesus wants Thomas, wants all of us, to believe without doubt.

We are called to accept Jesus's Resurrection as “true, genuine, or real.” We are called to be sure of Jesus's presence among the disciples. We are called to believe that Jesus rose on the third day—and yet, we are not, we cannot be offered empirical data—we do not have the blessing of putting our fingers in the marks of the nails or putting our hands in Jesus's side.

We do not get to have that subjective, empirical, unquestionable, investigation of evidence that the disciples were given two thousand years ago.

And yet, we are still called to believe and to not doubt.

But how do we do that?

How do we not doubt—not question others—when we do not have that first-hand, empirical evidence of what is “true, genuine, or real”?

I'll tell you how... through faith!

If “belief” is “conviction of the truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon especially when based on examination of evidence” (that’s another Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition)

Then “faith” is “firm belief in something for which there is no proof.”

Belief is based on evidence; faith requires no proof.

And so, when Jesus follows up his comment to Thomas by saying, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” he is perhaps, talking less about belief and more about faith.

Less about having evidence and more about having complete trust.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet still have **faith**.”

...

Martin B. Copenhaver, a Congregationalist pastor and one of my favorite living theologians, writes, “Faith is not about believing certain things; it is about putting our trust in someone.”

Having faith in Jesus Christ, having faith in the Resurrection, having faith that all these Gospel stories, all these Epistles, all these messages we hear from Apostles and Disciples and Saints and Theologians and Priests—

Having faith in all of that means trusting God. Trusting Jesus.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1)

Let me say that again... “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

We, as Christians, are assured every day, every moment, that what we hope for—that what our hearts and souls long for... We are assured that Jesus is Christ, that the Resurrection is real, that we are all saved.

And we, as Christians, have that conviction—we may not see Jesus’s wounds. We may not be able to put our hands in Jesus’s side. And yet, we still have the conviction of that which we cannot see.

We still have faith.

...

In his book, *Jesus Is the Question*, Copenhaver expands on his concept of faith—on this idea that faith is about trust. And he talks about faith as a verb...

Did you know: the English language is the only European language that does not have a verb form of the word “faith”?

In English, we cannot say something like “I faith”... instead, we have to say, “I have faith.”

And yet, “faith” is not a possession. It’s not something we can have or something we do or do not have.

Instead, Copenhaver offers, faith is a capacity, like joy of love.

And when faith becomes a capacity, then it also becomes a gradient. No longer is it an “all or nothing” concept. Instead, as a capacity, we can have faith, even in the smallest of dosages.

Like “I have *a little* faith”—not because I have more doubt, but because the capacity of my faith is not at its fullest in this situation.

.

If we were able to talk about faith as a capacity, in which degrees exist (not so much in direct relation to lacking faith, but in relation to a neutral existence), then those times when we do doubt—those times when our beliefs may waiver a little bit...

Those just become a natural cycle, a natural element of our faith.

Paul Tillich, a early 20th century theologian, says doubt is **not** the opposite of faith. Instead, doubt is an element of faith.

To have faith, one must also have doubt. To have a “firm belief in something for which there is no proof,” one must also “call into question the truth of” that something.

And the best part about all this—the greatest thing about faith, as Christians, is that we know our faith rests on more than just what the eyes can see. We know that our beliefs are so much more than just what we can see or feel or hear. Our faith, our beliefs, what we know to be true, despite empirical evidence—it is all based on what we experience in our hearts and in our souls.

It is all based on where we see Jesus in our lives—in the love we have for one another and the love we have for an invisible God.

Yes, it is hard to believe without ever seeing! It is hard to love without ever fully knowing Him who receives our love.

But our faith tells us that He is worthy of that love; he is worthy of believing in; he is our Lord and our Savior and He survived death and walked among the Disciples, with the wounds in his hands and his side.

...

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says.

And I hope that is us... I hope that is each of us sitting in these pews.

That doesn't mean we can't doubt—question or stumble a little bit when it comes to believing or having faith.

What it does mean, though, is that despite all the reasons we might think of that argue against Jesus, against God, against the Resurrection... Despite all of our logical, empirical evidence...

We.

Still.

Believe.

We may not see, in this life, the Resurrected Jesus. We may never know, in this life, through our own first-person experiences, that Jesus overcame death for our salvation.

But, if we believe, if we have faith (or... you know... if we “faith,” like it's a verb), then one day, we will receive the proof that we so greatly seek in this life.

One day, we will be reunited with Jesus Christ and we will sit at that heavenly banquet and we will witness, in all God's Glory, the truth of the Resurrection and love God has for each one of us.

And that is worthy of an Alleluia!