

“Any Doubts?”
Rev. Susan M. Prichard
April 19, 2009
John 20:19-31

On this first Sunday after Easter, our gospel lesson comes from the gospel of John. It is a story as familiar as the Easter story itself. It is a story of faith and doubt and all that lies therein. Listen for and hear God’s word to us this day.

John 20: 19-31

This is one of my favorite stories in the bible. It is here that I meet another follower of Jesus who is a lot like me; someone who struggles to make sense of the improbable and refuses to go along with what he perceives, at first, to be mass hysteria. Thomas is the practical, down to earth disciple, who has seen first hand the miracles of Jesus, and still need assurance of his continuing presence.

I think that Thomas is the hero in this story. He represents all of us who struggle with reconciling our beliefs about God and Jesus, with the way the world seems to operate--when we are called to be in the world, but not be of the world—living as a Christian in our pluralistic culture becomes more and more difficult as the years go on. When our society drifts farther and farther away from the intent of our founding fathers and mothers that this nation was to be a light on the hill for all to see, living faithfully takes a lot of intentionality. (If this isn't a problem for you, you have my permission to skip this sermon and go straight to coffee hour.) So, I started thinking, maybe Christians should adopt the practices of the early church and 12 Step programs. We could call ourselves Doubter’s Anonymous, because each of us sometimes doubts about the power of the resurrection and the reality of God in our lives.

We could gather together, at least once a week, Sunday morning might be best. We could sing some hymns, share some stories, and focus on what the power of the risen Christ could do for us—if we asked for his help. After reading some scripture and saying a prayer, we could recite the Twelve Steps of the AA program substituting the word doubt for alcohol.

“The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to

them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.
 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principals in our affairs.”
- (AA Step Book, p. 4)

Thomas has gotten a bad rap throughout history. His devotion is often called into question because he needed to see to believe. Each and every one of us processes information differently and thereby discovers ‘truth’ in different ways.

If we were to use the Myers-Briggs personality indicator to explore how people look at and interact with their world, we would see just how different we all are. We would discover that people use different senses and intuitions to process information. Some people can accept on faith what others demand to see for themselves. Neither is right or wrong, only different ways of processing information about their world.

We might begin to understand that some people need to experience things through their five senses, while others are willing to accept what their intuition tells them. Some of us thrive on stability while others long for variety. Some of us hear God in the silence, while others find God in community. No way is more valid than another. Each of us, however, has preferences based on who we are.

According to one commentator, “Jesus met his disciples in different ways, according to their needs and maybe their personalities. So it is with us. As we move through life, the Christ invites faith in multitudes of ways. To some Christ comes as a surprise gift, as he did to Mary—when we are feeling that everyone and all we need has left us, there is the presence of the Christ holding us in comfort and support. We may not even recognize the voice of God when that support comes, but it speaks to us tenderly. Sometimes the Christ simply appears in the center of our life as the church—when we are gathered but anxious about the way forward, there is the Christ saying, ‘My peace I give to you’ and inspiring us. Among us may be those who find faith a challenge and who ask tough questions about situations and possibilities—to those people comes the Christ who understands their doubts and moves as close as touch, the touch that reveals to us the wounds that Christ shares.” (Lectern Resource, p.18-9)

In our text this morning, we are looking into the quality of Christian community at its beginning. They are beginning the process of discerning what holds them together. It is not just faith in the risen Christ that binds them, but also their belief that what they possess belongs to the Christ and the community. Sounds like the meat for a stewardship sermon-- doesn't it? Once you believe, you want to share what you have with Christ and

the community. And isn't this where doubt comes back in?

The Christian community has always struggled with that utopian ideal of sharing everything for the good of all. It rarely works for long, unfortunately. Human beings want to hold on to what belongs to them. And so the ancient struggle begins. How do we keep what we have and yet, express our gratitude and faith in God's goodness to us with others? It is an old dance. The ancient Hebrews worked it out with a 'first fruits' tithe of 10% to God in gratitude for blessings. In this way the first of the harvest went to God. Before the bills were paid, before the taxes to Rome were paid, before they went on vacation or bought new animals for their flocks, they honored God.

Paul Tillich once said, "If faith is understood as being concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith. Existential doubt and faith are poles of the same reality, the state of ultimate concern. Serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates a seriousness of the concern, its unconditional character." [Aha! April 23, 2006]

We come here each week seeking answers to our questions of faith. We come to be reminded that God is there for us all week long, even if we don't sense a direct contact with God. We gather in community to support one another—sharing our joys and concerns—sometimes being the supporter, other times being the one supported.

Community is an important element in the preservation of faith. Thomas didn't see Jesus until he rejoined the community. "Fred Craddock wrote a little brochure for preachers. There's one part in particular that I love. He says, 'You will have a time when you will lose your faith. Don't panic. Let the faith of the community carry you until you recover.' We all have our moments when we can't see and we can't believe and we've lost it completely, but if we stay in the community and just let them carry us along, then eventually, in my experience anyway, I recover it. I don't know how long it might take, but it'll come back." [Aha! April 23, 2006]

The reason I can call Thomas a hero is because he gave the church a wonderful gift. He gave us permission to vocalize our concerns and questions. He challenged the testimonies of his friends in order to gain an understanding of what their experience might mean, not just for them, but also for him—and for us. And when he finally sees the risen Jesus, he is not rejected, but embraced. His questioning did not put him outside the circle of community, but firmly enclosed him in it.

We are a community that is questioning, that is engaging in conversations about the central tenets of our faith, our belief in our ability to put together a great profile and find a new pastor for this church. Let's let the power of the risen Christ and the example of the early church to work through its doubts, be our guide as we journey together on our walk with God. Let us suspend our doubts, so that, we too, may see the risen Christ walking and working among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.