

Sunday, April 8, 2018
Second Sunday of Easter (Year B)

John 20.19-31

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

During the Great 50 Days of Easter, our scripture readings focus on the meaning of the Resurrection that we witnessed on Easter Day. They focus on what it means to live into new relationship with the resurrected Lord. They focus on what it means for us to live into the resurrected life as followers of Jesus Christ. So what does it mean, then, that on this second Sunday of Easter, the icon for our relationship with and life in the Resurrected Lord is none other than Doubting Thomas?

Personally, I've always loved Thomas. If I had to pick a favorite disciple, it would be Thomas. Maybe because, in many ways, I can sympathize and identify with him. Not that I have any doubts about who Jesus is. And to be honest, neither did he. The designation "Doubting Thomas" is not only unfortunate, it is actually not accurate. Let me explain.

As we heard in the Gospel for today, Jesus makes his first post-resurrection appearance to the disciples – the male disciples – on the evening of Easter. All of the remaining disciples are together at the time of the appearance, except for Thomas. Initially they do not recognize Jesus. Only after he shows them the wounds in his hands and his side do they recognize that this is the Risen Lord. When Thomas returns from wherever he's been, the ten disciples tell him "We have seen the Lord." To which Thomas famously responds, "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" (Jn 20.25). Forever saddling him with his unfortunate moniker. Thomas was not asking for anything that the other disciples had not already received. Remember that the other ten disciples did not initially recognize Jesus either. It was only when that they saw his wounds that they recognized Jesus and came to believe in the Resurrection.

But just because Thomas says, "unless I [have proof] I will not believe," does that warrant casting him as a doubter? Given what we know about Thomas, I think the opposite is true. The Synoptic Gospels only mention Thomas in lists of the Twelve. But John's Gospel tells us a little more about Thomas. John records two accounts of Thomas, each revealing something about what kind of man he really was.

The first involves the death of Lazarus. When Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus has died, we are told "Thomas . . . said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" (Jn 11.16). Now Thomas' statement is a bit ambiguous. Who is he talking about, "that we may die with him"? Jesus or Lazarus? We don't know for sure. But going to die with Lazarus does not make a lot of sense. Jesus, on the other hand, has already foretold his own death (Jn 8.21-30) and is making his way toward Jerusalem where that will be accomplished. Is Thomas referencing this chain of events and is using Lazarus' own death as a prompt that they are supposed to follow Jesus into death? Possibly. Suffice it to say, this scene tells us something about Thomas' devotion to friends, be that friend Lazarus or Jesus. And that Thomas is so devoted that he willing to follow, even if it means his own death.

The second account of Thomas is at the Last Supper, when Jesus delivers his final teachings and instruction to his disciples. In the first part of that discourse, Jesus talks about how he is the way to the Father. The famous speech, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (Jn 14.2), which Jesus ends with “And you know the way to the place where I am going” (Jn 14.4). Thomas mistakes Jesus’ statement as referring to a geographic location. To which “Thomas said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’” (Jn 14.5). Prompting Jesus to say “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14.6). Despite the misunderstanding of geographic “way” versus theological “way,” Thomas demonstrates his devotion to Jesus and his willingness to follow him, if he just knows the way.

These accounts clearly show Thomas to be extremely devoted. And that he is a man of action. To the point that he is willing to go wherever he is asked to go, even if it means going to his own death. If anything, Thomas is an analytical, literal thinker. We especially see this in his exchange with Jesus over “the way” to where Jesus is going. Once he is clear on what is going on, Thomas’ sense of devotion and duty kick in and he is there, all the way.

So it’s understandable that Thomas was dubious about the disciples’ claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Dubious because that had never happened before. Other than Lazarus, and that was a completely different thing. That was resuscitation at the hands of Jesus. Not someone bringing themselves back to life. It was just such a fantastical story that did not make any sense. Particularly to someone like Thomas. And he was not willing to accept until he had some sort of proof.

Well, Thomas gets what he asks. A week later, Jesus appears again, this time to specifically see Thomas. Jesus “said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe’” (Jn 20.27). What’s important here is that the word translated as “doubt” is more appropriately translated as “faithless.” There’s a subtle difference. Faith is trusting in what is unseen. So in being faithless, Thomas, by his very nature – the analytical, literal thinker – is willing to trust, but needs something more to go on, something he can observe. And Jesus willingly provides Thomas with what he needs to be able to move forward in faith.

We know this because Thomas’ reaction is the first recorded profession of faith in the Risen Lord. “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20.28). Thomas never lacked faith in Jesus. He just needed something to go on. Something to help him get over the fantastical, unbelievable claims of the other disciples. They had already received their proof. Now Thomas has his.

And in response, Jesus states, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (Jn 20.29). This is not meant as a criticism of Thomas. If anything, it is a recognition that everyone comes to faith in a different way. It is recognition that after his ascension, those who follow – us – will not have the opportunity to directly see or touch Jesus’ wounds for ourselves.

Yes, we all need some sort of evidence to move us to a place where we can believe. We aren't just born with a completely formed faith. It has to develop. For some that begins in early life through how we are raised. For others, that may come later in life as they come to know Jesus in various ways. But regardless of when that happens, at some point we all need something to point us in the right direction. We all, like Thomas, are in needs of some sign, some prompt, some evidence that helps form or solidify our faith in the Risen Lord.

Jesus' comment is, if anything, a recognition that he meets us exactly where we are. He is able to meet us in our faith. He is able to meet us in our questioning. He is able to meet us in our uncertainties. He is even able to meet us in our doubts. And wherever it is that he meets us, wherever we are in our faith or our faithlessness, he provides proof in ways that we can receive and accept. In ways that move us forward in our lives of faith.

That's going to be different for each of us. For some, it's by appealing to the mind – to what makes sense. For these people, what is needed to move forward in faith is found through the stories of Jesus' life and ministry, from the testimonies of the original witnesses to the Resurrection. Stories that touch our imaginations, helping us to understand who and what Jesus is all about.

For some, it's by appealing to the heart – to what feels right. For these people, what is needed to move forward in faith is found through acts of kindness, acts of love, by others. Acts that touch our hearts, helping us to realize, "oh, that's what God's love is like."

For some, like Thomas, it's by having more tangible, observable proof – what can be seen and touched. For these people what is needed to move forward in faith is found through acts of charity. Actions that are tangible ways of seeing God's love in action.

While these means of proof can and do happen at any time and any place, the purpose of the Church is to facilitate and provide what is needed to move us forward in faith. For the Risen Christ is experienced first and foremost in community. The Church is the ongoing sign of Christ's Resurrection. We experience the Risen Christ by hearing the stories of faith presented in scripture and sermon. We experience the Risen Christ by feeling his love expressed through Christian fellowship. We experience the Risen Christ by participating in acts of charity in our in-reach and outreach programs.

And overlaid on all of these are our acts of worship. Bringing together all these elements through Word and Sacrament – particularly the sacrament of Baptism where we are joined to the Body of Christ, and the sacrament of Eucharist where we partake of the Body and Blood of our Lord, strengthening us as members of the Body, nourishing us to carry on Christ's work in the world. And in our worship, even such seemingly innocuous rituals as passing the peace, where we share the peace of Christ that he first shared with the disciples; and the giving and receiving of offering, where we give of ourselves, our time, treasure, and talents, in service to Christ. All these acts are means of allowing us to express our faith, while also seeking to enhance our faith. No matter whether we firmly believe or are uncertain or have doubts. Because no matter where we are on our faith journey, Christ is ready to reach out and provide just what we need to help us move forward.

The Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz, parish priest and biblical scholar, sums up the story of Thomas and his example to us so eloquently. She writes, “We know from the story of Thomas that God will not reject us because of our doubts and fears. Instead, God will offer us what we need. Do we need to touch Jesus' scars? Do we need to hear God's voice in the loving voices of others? Whatever it is we need, God will offer it in some way that we will be able to find, if we reach out to faith” (Synthesis Today Quote for April 2, 2018, via email).

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)

And the Risen Lord is here, in this place, ready to give each of us what we need to move forward in faith. Alleluia!