

Sunday, April 24, 2022
Second Sunday of Easter (Year C)

John 20.19-31

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/954994051844720>

(Sermon begins at about 17:55)

“Faithful Thomas”

If there was ever an election to select a saint for our times, for our contemporary age, Thomas would get my vote. Of the many names given to the times we live in, one of the most common used in secular society is “the information age.” An age in which we generate and consume more information than ever before. An age that is defined by the use—and I would add, abuse—of information. An age which has seen the advent of “fake news.” That has seen self-proclaimed experts and pundits of all political persuasions spin stories and twist their explanations of what should be observable events in ways that would make the most accomplished of contortionists blush. An age in which so much of what is presented as news, as fact, bears no relation to the objective truth. It’s absolutely dizzying and mind-boggling. Its times such as these in which we need the likes of our friend Thomas. The one so often referred to as “Doubting Thomas.” A moniker which, in itself, is actually an unjustified spin on the events of the actual encounter Thomas has with Jesus. The result of fake news, if you will.

Let’s take a look at our Gospel account. An objective look. Or as objective as we can get given the information presented.

Our story begins on the evening of Easter Day. Ten of the disciples are locked away for fear of the religious authorities. Remember that of the twelve disciples, Judas Iscariot is no longer in the picture. And Thomas is inexplicably absent. Despite the doors being locked, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord” (Jn 20.19-20). Later on, Thomas returns from wherever he has been. The ten are all excited. “Thomas, you’re not going to believe it! Guess who showed up? Jesus! He has risen, just like he said would happen!” They’re right. Thomas does not believe it, and says so.

A week later, Jesus shows up again. This time, Thomas is present. Jesus addresses Thomas directly. “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). These words alone are enough to convince Thomas.

Because of Thomas’ initial skepticism when the ten tell him about Jesus, and Jesus’ recorded words a week later—“Do not doubt but believe”—Thomas has been forever saddled with his unfortunate nickname. But that is not a fair assessment of what happened. Yes, the word that Jesus uses is translated as “doubt.” But the original Greek is far more nuanced. Doubt implies an unwillingness to accept what is being conveyed. What is implied in the Gospel account is not that Thomas was unwilling to believe. Rather, the implication is more of uncertainty. That he was open to possibilities, but was not willing to fully accept what he had been told until he had

all the facts. After all, this whole situation was so fantastical, so unbelievable. Someone coming back from the dead? Really? I mean, seriously, if someone told you that a dear friend who you had just seen murdered had come back to life, would you be so quick to believe them? Personally, I would want to get my facts straight. Which is precisely what Thomas is seeking to do.

While we focus on Thomas, we generally fail to recognize that his reaction on Easter Day upon returning to the ten, is no different than that of the disciples' initial reaction earlier that morning when Mary Magdalene came to them and told them that the tomb was empty. They didn't believe her. They, too, needed proof. That is why Peter and John ran to the tomb. To see for themselves. But we don't refer to them as Doubting Peter and Doubting John, do we? They were looking for proof, just like Thomas was. And when Jesus did appear to the ten disciples later that evening, we are told that he greets them, and before they respond, he shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. It is only then that they rejoice at this presence. The implication being that they do not initially recognize him. That he has to show them the wounds of the crucifixion as proof of who he is. Again, nothing that Thomas isn't asking for himself.

While we often refer to "Doubting Thomas," that unfortunate moniker really misses the point. The story of Thomas is not about him doubting. Yes, he is, to say the least, uncertain and he is skeptical of what he is told. Who wouldn't be uncertain, or even have doubts? Who wouldn't be skeptical? Peter and John were doubtful and skeptical of what Mary Magdalene told them. The rest of the disciples were doubtful and skeptical, even when Mary returned after her encounter with the Risen Lord, passing along Jesus' message to them. That should have been a signal to them to jump up and go out to proclaim the resurrected Christ, pointing to the empty tomb as proof that what Jesus proclaimed is true. But no.

The story of Thomas is not about his doubts. It is really about him moving beyond those doubts. It is about the love and abundant grace that Jesus has in coming directly to Thomas to help him move beyond his doubts. For in the encounter with Jesus a week later, Jesus meets Thomas' questions and concerns to help him move to a place of belief.

When the disciples first told Thomas about Jesus' appearing to them, Thomas said, "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 20.25b). When Jesus comes directly to Thomas, he invites him, "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). Offering Thomas exactly what he needed as proof. Yet, Thomas did not actually take Jesus up on his offer. He did not have to. Because Jesus was present and offering what Thomas thought he needed. But what he really needed was for Jesus just to be present to him. To know that Jesus was there for him. That was enough. That was more than enough. Because in Jesus' simple offer of himself, Thomas was moved to proclaim, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20.28). The first confession of faith in the Risen Lord. The first verbal acknowledgment of just who Jesus truly is. That God is fully revealed through Jesus. That Jesus' mission to bring reconciliation between God and his people has indeed been completed. With this, Thomas is able to move on. Move on into a new reality in which Jesus is no longer physically present, but is alive, nonetheless. In this, he is not Doubting Thomas, but Faithful Thomas. Because he was

willing to stick with, even in the midst of skepticism and uncertainty, until he got the answers he needed. Answers that only served to increase and strengthen his faith.

But what about us? How do we, those who have not witnessed the Resurrection firsthand, come to accept the truth of what happened that first Easter if even Jesus' closest followers, his dearest friends, had a hard time accepting it? And they were there!

The Risen Christ, in his exchange with Thomas, brings us into the picture, as well, when he says "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (Jn 20.29). In these words, Jesus is almost telling us that it is precisely because of Thomas and his journey from skepticism and uncertainty to belief that we should likewise believe. That he is a model for our own faith journeys.

Our Gospel reading concludes with the statement about the purpose of the Gospel record: that these accounts "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" (Jn 20.31). A statement reiterating Jesus' own comments about those of us who follow. About the future generations of Christians, of which we are a part.

Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey gives a delightful assessment of Thomas' role in providing us what we need to carry on the faith tradition of the Risen Lord. An assessment that is at the same time whimsical and totally serious:

Scripture is full of vividly drawn characters who ooze humanity, perhaps none more than Thomas. The dude is *relatable* . . . I can't help but think of him as the patron saint of the secular age (as well as the patron saint of FOMO¹) . . . His instinct was to require hard proof before assenting to a claim that was objectively bananas. Dead people stay dead, and it is embarrassing to believe otherwise. Only this story is asking us to do just that."²

Admittedly, the Gospel is asking us to buy into a pretty unbelievable story. Which is why we need the likes of Thomas. And of all of those like him. Those who are willing to doubt and to question so as to get to the truth. Thomas has a unique role in the Christian story. He shows us that it is okay to be skeptical. It is okay to have doubts. It is okay to question. As long as we are also open to possibilities. As long as we are open to considering the facts presented. As long as we are willing to do the hard work of sifting through the fake news to get to the truth. As long as we are willing to be open to what God is doing in the world, what God is doing in our lives, no matter how fantastical it may seem. And as long as we are willing to accept that sometimes God does not provide clear cut answers and rather asks us to trust, saying "do not doubt but believe." And once we get to a place of being able to do that we, like Thomas, will be able to wholeheartedly proclaim "My Lord and my God!"

¹ Fear of missing out.

² Katherine Willis Pershey, "Living by the Word: April 24, Second Sunday of Easter," Christian Century, April 6, 2022. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/april-24-easter-2c-revelation-14-8-john-2019-31>.