
Sermon

The Reverend Deacon Edward Fuller
Sermon on John 20:19-31
March 30, 2008

I don't believe it!

Thomas --- practical --- seeing is believing Thomas! He was also a bit of a pessimist. Once Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem in spite of what awaited him there and Thomas made an announcement to the other disciples:

"Let us also go,
That we may die with him."

Cheerful fellow, Thomas! "Let us also go that we may die with him."

Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening, but Thomas was absent. When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, 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."

So, there you have it. Thomas laid it all on the line and became known forever as Thomas the Doubter.

John tells us that Jesus returned a week later, and this time Thomas was present. It is interesting to note how Jesus handled Thomas. Jesus didn't say, "You've really done it this time, Thomas, you've really let me down. You're off the team!" What he said was:

"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe."

Remember now, Thomas set the conditions under which he would believe. So Jesus said, OK, Thomas, I'll go along with you. Here are my hands. Here are the nail marks. Here is the wound in my side. Go ahead! Put your hand there! And then Jesus said, "Do not doubt, but believe." With that, Thomas immediately recognized Jesus and said, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus responded; "Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

That is one of my favorite bible verses because it applies to me --- and to you. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus blesses us for our belief.

In today's gospel reading, Thomas goes from faith to doubt and then to greater faith.

Has that ever happened to you? For most of us, if we are honest, we will confess that we have also doubted. If we are thoughtful at all about our faith, we will sometimes find ourselves asking, "Was Jesus real? Was He the Son of God? And

then, that one doubt that makes us cringe when we think it; is my faith just wishful thinking?"

Sometimes it just doesn't make sense and we struggle mightily to understand. St. Augustine has some good advice for us in those times. He admonishes us to not attempt to understand so that we might believe; but to believe so that we might understand.

The story of Thomas helps us because it deals with a very real problem that most of us experience --- doubt --- unbelief.

Very importantly, this story confirms that Jesus does not condemn those who doubt. Just as He did not condemn Thomas, He will not condemn us.

Jesus recognized that there would be future Christians who would not have the privilege of seeing Him in the flesh so He gave us His very special blessing (some call it His last beatitude):

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

He didn't say "Blessed are those who never doubt". He didn't say that. He said: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

I believe that most Christians, even the Great Christians, have moments of doubt. We all have a bit of Doubting Thomas inside us.

I am often asked "is it OK to doubt?" My answer is that it is predictably human and an important part of growth in faith.

After Mother Teresa died a few years ago, there were a number of articles published about her doubt. It is hard to believe that this icon of faith, this servant of the poorest and most marginalized who led an exemplary life of faith could have had doubts. But in letters to her spiritual mentors, she once wrote:

"I am told that God lives in me ---

and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul"

She also wrote:

"Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven,
there is such convicting emptiness
that those very thoughts return like sharp knives
and hurt my very soul."

How can it be that such a saintly woman could experience such spiritual pain -- could entertain such serious doubt? I like what Archbishop Henry d'Souza said. He said the letters showed that Mother Teresa was both "holy and human",

Both "holy and human"! Those are the two sides of it aren't they -- the two sides of each of us. She was holy and human and so are we.

So, we take with us yet another example of going from faith to doubt to greater faith.

It is instructive to note that in her spiritual pain, Mother Teresa turned to her Christian Mentors. She didn't suffer in silence. She turned to other Christians.

Mother Teresa's doubt was obviously quite serious.

But, through Teresa, we can see grace in doubt. Thomas and Teresa both had quite serious doubt and found grace as it led them to greater faith.

It might be just a coincidence but Thomas and Teresa have something else in common. Her ministry was among the poorest people of India. According to early tradition, Thomas was the first missionary to India.

What we can learn from Thomas and Teresa is that the grace of Jesus Christ comes to us in the midst of our doubts and our travails. He comes not to condemn but to bless us and fill us with grace.

To Thomas, He came personally --- in the flesh.

To Mother Teresa, He came in the form of a child who needed teaching and a leper who needed shelter.

Christ might come to you one day as a person who helps you or another day as a person who needs help.

Christ might come to you as a helpful word from this pulpit - or a helpful word from scripture - or as the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist.

Christ came to Thomas at his darkest hour. Thomas loved Jesus deeply had been zealous for him and Jesus' crucifixion broke his heart. It is easy to understand why he was slow to believe again.

We can also learn that our view of Christ cannot be narrow and restricted to our personal experiences. The entire Christian community has much to offer. The witness of the other disciples was powerful. They told Thomas they had seen the Lord themselves. Powerful witness which, for the moment, Thomas doubted. Thomas wanted to package Jesus up in a neat little box that contained all he had seen, touched and heard during the time he spent with Jesus. But, after Jesus' death, Thomas was not eager to see or think outside of that box at all. Thomas simply could not believe that Jesus might present himself in form and dimensions that were new, different and perhaps even uncomfortable.

Like Thomas, many of us struggle with different expressions and interpretations of Christian faith. When an expression differs from our view, from what we have learned and come to believe based on our personal experiences ---- when it differs from what we have become comfortable with, we often reject it out of hand - an immediate response of unbelief - just like Thomas. That, most unfortunately, goes on at all levels of Christ's Holy Church even today. I fear there have been many instances when I have done so and, in so doing, may very well have rejected Christ himself.

As John concludes this chapter we read that "these words are written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing we may have life in His name".

This Gospel shows us that there are different kinds of faith and that faith comes in different ways with differing intensities. Mary believed immediately when the Lord called her name. The disciples had to see the risen Lord. Thomas had to touch the wounds. We all have differing needs and find varying pathways to faith.

Many of you know exactly what I am talking about. Many of you have experienced the grace of Jesus' presence at the worst moments of your life, --- at times when belief became most difficult.

We can also learn from Thomas and Teresa that it is important to surround ourselves with Christian witnesses when besieged by doubt - when unbelief shakes our faith. It is through them, the Body of Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ, that support, love and grace is available to us.

And finally, we can learn from the words Jesus spoke to Thomas. Jesus said:

"Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen
and yet have come to believe."

He was talking about us. You and me.

Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Ed Fuller at: efuller@stphilipscathedral.org