

A Sermon by the Rev. Margery E. Howell

Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, Virginia Beach, VA

Easter 2, Year A

John 20: 19-31

April 23, 2017

“Doubting Thomas”

Easter is not one day but a season that is fifty days long. The Easter season, also known as Eastertide, culminates on the Day of Pentecost (Pente means 50), when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many regard Christmas Day, Easter Sunday and the Day of Pentecost as the three greatest feasts of the church year.

Today, the Second Sunday of Easter is often called “Low Sunday,” because the attendance in church on this day is often so much lower than the attendance on Easter Sunday. That’s understandable, but it’s also unfortunate, since this is the day when we traditionally read the lesson of “Doubting Thomas.” Many people think that it’s unfair to label Thomas as “doubting.” After all, he not only ended up believing, he ended up believing profoundly-“My Lord and my God!” he claimed. Thomas’ response is very different from, “Well, it is you, Jesus.”

Some like to point out, as well, that Thomas in fact confesses his belief without having to test the evidence before him, as Jesus invites him to do (“Put your finger here...”) We might also wonder if the other disciples would have needed some sort of visual or even tactile confirmation of Jesus’ presence after his death, if they (like Thomas) had not been present when Jesus first appeared to the others in that locked room a week earlier.

Jesus enters a locked room where the disciples are gathered in fear of their lives. These disciples are ten of those who benefited from Jesus’ companionship, of hearing Jesus’ teaching, and of witnessing Jesus’ miracles. They had been with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. Yet, the ten gathered were also the people who scattered and ran away and denied Jesus in the hour of His greatest need.

We might expect Jesus to give the disciples a hard time about the way they left him during the darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Jesus might have said, “What happened to you guys? Where were you when I needed you? But instead of scolding them, Jesus says simply, “Peace be with you.”

If this is the way Jesus treats these ten disciples who failed, abandoned and denied him in his misery, even though they had been privileged to be with him intimately, why do you suppose many people believe that God is inclined to punish us so severely when we fail? What can we learn about God from this peaceful way Jesus greets the disciples

despite their having abandoned him at the darkest hour? How does God respond to our shortcomings? And what can we learn about ourselves and the way we treat others when they, too, have failed?

The most questions I am asked frequently from the residents at the nursing home are, “Why has God not healed me? Why has God caused my illness? Why doesn’t God answer my prayers?” The answer I always give is, “God has not caused your illness because He is not vengeful or punishing. God is love. God answers our prayers in His time not ours. We are all equal in God’s eyes. No one is any better than any other.” Unfortunately, a large number of the residents grew up in the Southern Baptist tradition which they learned from their early childhood, and they learned that God would punish them for any sins they had done throughout their lives. So I spend a great deal of time trying to remind the residents that God loves each of us equally and does not punish us when we sin. It is a very hard lesson for them to grasp because of their upbringing.

The common phrase, “you have to see to believe” feels particularly relevant to Thomas this morning. Thomas says he needs tangible evidence of Jesus’ wounds in order to believe that Jesus has indeed been resurrected. In many ways, Thomas’ doubt is a very human reminder of our own skepticism concerning matters of the Divine, of mystery, and of that which exceeds our rational understanding.

And yet, one of the greatest blessings we encounter as Christians is the freedom to admit when we have doubts. As faithful Christians, we should have the audacity to ask tough questions concerning our faith and traditions.

For some, doubt is synonymous with having a lack of faith, but doubt and faith are two sides of the same coin. Anne Lamont, who is a famous writer says, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” And Paul Tillich, a theologian, says doubt isn’t the opposite of faith. It is an element of faith. Rather than suppress our doubts, we should explore them and allow them to set us on a journey of discovery and a deepening of our beliefs and convictions. In the Gospel lesson this morning, we heard Thomas ask for proof, and we also want proof as well that our faith is not in vain.

Thomas often gets a bad rap for doubting the resurrection of Jesus, however, he was no more doubtful than the other disciples. After all, the other disciples didn’t believe that Jesus had risen until he appeared to them, so why should we expect Thomas to be any different?

Doubt can be a wonderful tool that propels us into deeper learning, earnest soul searching and spiritual revelation. Faith based on absolute certainty leads to fanaticism, but faith tempered with doubt is mature and stable.

The author of Hebrews writes, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is not void of doubt, but requires a daily commitment to developing our spiritual walk despite life’s uncertainties and sometimes cruelties.

Faith doesn’t take away our doubts, but is strengthened by them. And faith doesn’t deliver us from our problems and heartaches, but gives us the strength to persevere through them and lead others as well as they navigate around the abyss of nothingness.

“The unease you feel is not doubt.

It is hunger to go deeper.

You are not done yet.

Learn from Thomas,

who, when Jesus planned to go to Bethany

where they had tried to stone him,

said, “Let us go with him.”

You want to see the scar of your betrayal

and how love bears it.

You want to touch the wounds

and enter the heart of The One
Who Suffers for the World
and lives.

Now, more than before,
you are ready to come and die with him,
let love undo you and begin again.

Don't belittle your restlessness.

Let it lead you.

Reach out.

Even now he is saying your name.”¹

May his resurrection power be at work in our lives as we learn to allow
our doubts to strengthen our faith. AMEN

¹ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Thomas, undone”