

The Believing Thomas

John 20:19-31

April 11, 2010

I.

Two important events come together this morning. First, we heard about the doubt and belief of St. Thomas, our patron saint. Then, after the service we will complete our spring clean-up program to care for another St. Thomas, our church.

And I invite everyone, as we think about how the historical St. Thomas speaks to our faith and spirits, to join us later in the pavilion as the community of St. Thomas calls upon our energy and bodies.

And please come even if you don't have a work assignment. We also need supervisors and spectators to cheer us on, and once again the Mens' Breakfast Group will be grilling its traditional burgers and hotdogs. So, come, sit back, relax, and enjoy yourselves.

But first, I would like to discuss today's reading. And there are a lot of sermons in these few verses from John's Gospel. I could talk about mission, or the beginning of the church, or the Holy Spirit, or forgiveness.

And it might be easy to find myself in the position of the fellow chatting with his friend on a Sunday afternoon, and the friend asked, "What was your preacher's sermon about this morning?" The other fellow scratched his chin and replied, "I don't know. He never did say."

Hopefully that won't happen today. I would like to focus on St. Thomas and ask what we really know about our patron saint and one of our Lord's loyal disciples. And I also would like to point out that Thomas should be remembered for his belief, not his doubt.

Today's reading is one of the most well-known stories of Thomas, although he is mentioned several other times in the New Testament. We don't know from the Bible what eventually happened to him. But the church's ancient tradition says that he, and all the other disciples except John, went into the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and eventually were killed and became martyrs.

And Thomas' story is that he was the only one to go beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire at the time. He became a missionary to India where he founded the church and finally was killed by the pagan priests who feared that he was converting too many people. And today, Thomas is held in very high regard by the Christian church in India.

II.

So, let's look at what today's reading says about Thomas. It began with the evening of Easter day. It was the day of the resurrection, and all the remaining disciples, except Thomas, had locked themselves in a room because they feared that the Jews who had condemned Jesus soon would come for them.

We don't know why Thomas was not there. Perhaps he simply was delayed on the way. The reading suggests he did arrive later in the evening. That part of the story is left to speculation.

But, in any event, even though the doors were locked, the resurrected Jesus appeared and stood among them. And later, when they told Thomas about it, he was not ready to believe. He said he would not be convinced until he was able to touch Jesus' wounds from the cross.

Thomas' reaction eventually led to the term "doubting Thomas." And this, I believe, does not reflect what actually happened. Thomas got a bad rap. Some people wrongly used him as an example of a person of weak faith whose expressions of uncertainty should be avoided.

But that's not actually the case. All Thomas basically said was, "I'm not ready yet to believe you guys, I want a reality check." That was not lack of faith; but rather normal caution. After all, the resurrection only happened hours earlier, and there still was a lot of confusion about it. It would be natural for someone not in the room to be skeptical and want further proof.

In fact, the other disciples also disbelieved before they saw Jesus walk through the wall and heard him speak. According to the Gospels of Luke (24:11) and Mark (16:11), when the women who first went to the tomb ran back and reported earlier in the day that Jesus was gone and angels told them he had risen, the other disciples dismissed it as an idle tale and did not believe them.

Mark also reports that the disciples disbelieved the resurrection reports of the two people with whom Jesus walked on the road to Emmaus (16:12-13). And even after Jesus appeared, the other disciples doubted until Jesus showed them his hands and feet (Lk. 24:38-39).

So Thomas actually did not demand any more evidence of the resurrection than any of the others. They did not believe until they saw either.

And this leads me to briefly digress and reiterate a point I made last week on Easter Day. At the time the idea of a supernatural resurrection was so alien and unknown that the disciples would not have proclaimed it and staked their lives on it if it did not happen. Their initial dismissal of the idea that Jesus was alive made that clear.

And their own reaction would have told them that it would have been a weak deception to have falsely told others if it was untrue. If the resurrection simply was a conspiracy by the disciples it shortly would have unraveled. The fact that it has been received in the faith for over two thousand years attests to its authenticity.

In any event, then the Gospel reading fast forwards one week. The disciples again were back in the room, and this time Thomas was with them. And Jesus appeared again, and saw Thomas. Now, we might think that Jesus could have said something like, "Well, Thomas, fancy seeing you here" or, "Where were you last week?" And Thomas might have said "Gulp."

But that is not what happened. Jesus did not criticize or admonish Thomas, but simply told him to stop doubting and to believe. And he offered Thomas the chance to touch his wounds. Thomas, however, did not do so, for his doubts evaporated immediately. Thomas recognized him as his Lord and his God, on the spot.

And then Jesus said, and this is important, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Here Jesus was not only talking about people living at the time, but also people for all time. He was talking to us.

III.

So, in some ways the story is not really about Thomas, but rather about Jesus' grace in meeting Thomas where he was. Instead of questioning Thomas' faith, Jesus gave Thomas the chance to show his faith. He invited him to touch his wounds, but that turned out to be unnecessary. Thomas immediately expressed his belief.

In the same way, Jesus meets us where we are in our lives. He does not impose any litmus tests. We don't have to go to church for a certain number of weeks before he will reach out to us. We don't have to say exactly the right kind of prayers before he will respond. All we have to do is have faith, be sincere, and ask, and he will be there to answer.

We all probably have had questions about our faith at some time or another. The trials and tribulations of life can lead us to wonder where God is in some of the things that happen. Sometimes we're up, and sometimes we're down, and sometimes we just don't seem to care.

Or we might yield to the temptation to limit our beliefs to things we logically can understand in our own knowledge, which would undermine our faith. We might forget that with God all things are possible because what we call the laws of nature actually are God's laws, not ours. They work in accordance with God's will, not ours. Our faith is grounded in that reality.

But our questions make no difference to Jesus. Even if we close the door for a while, Jesus still is there. A locked and closed door was no barrier to Christ's entry into the room in today's Gospel when he brought peace and comfort to people who did not yet even understand the resurrection.

For us today, who do have that understanding, the call is even stronger to draw strength from the fact that he is right outside any doors in our lives that we might have closed and locked.

This is because Thomas did not have our advantages. Back then, he and the other disciples did not have the benefit of Scripture and history. They were living it as it unfolded. The Gospels had not yet been written, there was no organized church, and Paul had not yet been converted on the road to Damascus. They all, including Thomas, were a little uncertain.

But today, things are different. We know what happened, and we know what it means for us. We know that if we invite Jesus to come through the door and into our lives he will do so.

IV.

Today's gospel describes the human condition. In some way or another, at some time or another, we all can doubt. Or in an instant we can falter and fail. It can be a moment of anger, or greed, or prideful arrogance, or a moral lapse. It can be something that hurts another, or it can be something known only to us—and to God—that separates us from godly obedience.

But God wants our faith because he loves us. And more importantly, he accepts our doubts as he accepts us. Just as with Thomas, he wants us to believe, and just as with Thomas he will meet us where we are to draw us closer to him.

So, Thomas' story is our story. The disciples' story is our story. It's the story of God's disciples in every age, and it tells what it means to be Christians who move between faith and doubt. We all live in the uncertainties that trouble this fallen world.

But we are not without resources along the way. We always have God's sustaining love, and grace, and power. In that we find our faith. And through our faith our doubts, like Thomas' doubts, will disappear. *Amen.*