

Overcoming Doubt

John 20:19-31

April 15, 2012

I.

Today is a special day at St. Thomas for two reasons. One is that after the service we will have our spring clean-up to which you all are invited even if you don't have a work assignment. Just come and hang out. The other is that we also remember someone who is pretty important around here. Today's gospel tells of our patron saint, St. Thomas the Apostle.

But there also are a lot of other sermons in these few verses from John's Gospel, aren't there? I could talk about mission, or the beginning of the church, or the Holy Spirit, or forgiveness.

If I tried all that I might 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 the most well-known story 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 disciple 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 condemned Jesus soon would come for them.

And 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 those who were there. Later, when they told Thomas about it, he was not ready to believe. He said he would not be convinced until he could touch Jesus' wounds from the cross.

This reminds me of the mother who was not convinced about what her son told her he learned in Sunday School.

He said, "Our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to break the Israelites out of prison. When he got them to the Red Sea, his engineers built a pontoon bridge, and all the people walked across safely. Then he radioed headquarters and called in an air strike. Bombers came and blew up the bridge, and all the Israelites were saved."

Then his astonished mother said, "Is that really what your teacher taught you?" The boy replied, "Well, no, Mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"

Thomas also did not immediately believe the truth of the resurrection, and his reaction 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.

But that is not justified. Thomas merely wanted a reality check before he accepted what they said. 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.

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 Luke says that even after Jesus appeared, the other disciples doubted until Jesus showed them his hands and feet (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.

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, I would like to suggest that today's story is not really about Thomas' doubts, 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.

And we all probably have had questions about 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 or scientifically can understand, which of course also would undermine our faith. We would be forgetting that with God all things are possible because 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.

And that means that just as a locked door was no barrier to Christ's entry into the room in today's Gospel, we can draw strength from knowing that he is right outside any doors in our lives that we might have closed and locked. All he calls us to do is believe and let him enter.

We might also remember that we have advantages Thomas did not have. 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 begun his ministry.

But today, things are different. We know what happened, and we know what it means for us. It means that we are called every day to invite Jesus to be part of our lives. Jesus said ask and you will receive (Jn. 16:24) Paul said in the Book of Ephesians that God is able to do more than we ever could ask or imagine (3:20).

IV.

As a result, today's gospel describes the human condition. Even though we have Scripture to guide us, and even though we have teaching, and preaching, and classes and seminars, and church every Sunday, we still sometimes wonder.

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 wherever 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 in the uncertainties that trouble this fallen world.

In a few weeks we all will have an opportunity to embark on a six-week journey that can help us in those times, and can spiritually transform us and the church. Our newsletters and service bulletins already have mentioned a program called 40 Days in the Word.

We are starting to put the details together, and more information will be available. And we will see that it is a way through which our worship can be inspired, and we can experience God's enduring love, and grace, and power.

And it will not be just another adult education class. It will be flexible and easy to do on our own schedules, and we pray that everyone participates. Through it, and through our ongoing worship and fellowship, we can reaffirm our Christian hopes that sometimes also carry doubts. So please stand by for more details. You will not be disappointed.

In this respect, we might remember Paul's words in Romans. He said, "Hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (5:5). And isn't that what sustains us? It is the source of our faith, and through faith our doubts, like Thomas' doubts, will disappear. *Amen.*