

Do not Doubt; Only Believe

Second Sunday of Easter (A)

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The disciple Thomas has been called for generations - doubting Thomas, based upon the incident recounted in today's gospel. It is considered almost a shameful term, somehow not worthy of those whom the Lord calls disciples and yet, if we were honest with ourselves, doubt is or has been part of our faith journey.

This morning, I would like to explore the place of doubt in the faith journey. Let us start with Thomas himself. He is mentioned only in the four gospels and the book of Acts, but it is only in John's gospel that he is more than just a name amongst the list of disciples. In John's gospel, he appears in four incidents and is designated by John as the twin. His pairing with Matthew in the lists of Apostles has led some to speculate that he was Matthew's twin, but this is speculation. He first appears in John's gospel as Jesus is leaving to go to Bethany in chapter 11. He seems to resign himself to what is to come. When Jesus is heading off to raise Lazarus, John reports, "Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him.""

Later in the upper room, as Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them, Thomas says to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And then finally, when he returned to the upper room, and the others told him that he had missed the risen Lord coming among them, all he could say was, "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."

Thomas comes across as a hard-nosed realist. For him, he had to see to believe. Faith for him came from rationally drawing together the facts and building assumptions from them. Before we become too critical of Thomas, we should contextualise things. The women had told the disciples that Jesus was alive, but they did not believe; it was only the personal encounter that was to convince them. We have seen the Lord, they said, and they believed. Thomas asked for the same. His belief would also arise from the testimony his eyes would tell him.

It was a week later that Thomas would be satisfied. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he told Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus met Thomas in his unbelief and challenged him to believe, but John records the answer that Thomas gave "Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas' doubt gave way to the recognition of Jesus as having risen from the dead and Jesus, Lord and God. Thomas saw and understood that Jesus was more than human. He declares his divinity. His faith is now at a higher plane than the others and his declaration brings the others to a new understanding. Jesus as Lord and God.

John explains the purpose of his Gospel - not to give a biographical history of the man called Jesus, but as testimony that we might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing, you may have life in his name.

Indeed, John starts his letter with a similar concept, We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at

and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us- we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us. Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

We declare - What we have heard.
 What we have seen with our eyes
 What we have looked at
 What we have touched with our hands
and we do this to bring life and light to those in darkness.

Perhaps this is a rather simplistic view of the church and her purposes, but I believe this is a very simple manifesto. We are the Easter people. The children of the resurrection. The proclaimers of life to the world, and our task is to bring others to faith, not through manipulation, but through declaration. We are to declare to the world that the events in Jerusalem some 2000 years ago matter to us today.

Doubt is an integral part of this process. Like Thomas, we might find it hard to believe at times. It is not about collecting the series of facts we must process but about the personal encounter with the risen Lord that will challenge us to a new level of faith and a higher understanding. It is because we have difficulties that we can overcome them and if the story of Thomas means anything. Indeed the story of the two on the road to Emmaus, we have an assurance that it is in our doubts that Jesus will come to us to challenge us to that new and higher level of faith.

Where are you on that faith journey? What are the limits of your faith at the moment? You may believe in the resurrection, but how much do you trust God? What are the boundaries of your faith?

On the faith journey, God will challenge these boundaries so that our faith grows more robust and our declaration is more definite. Can you trust God as a provider?

AMEN