

“FOR ALL YOU DOUBTING THOMASES”

Date: April 18, 2007

Text: John 20: 19-29

Remember the old phrase “a doubting Thomas?” It’s been a long time since I heard anyone say that and I wonder if our teenagers even know what it means. I want to suggest this we re-visit the disciple Thomas from whom the term derives because he may be very much a person of our generation. John Eudes from the Abbey at the Genesee near Geneseo wrote, “The name of ‘Thomas’ means ‘twin’ and the early Christians noted that all of us are two people, a doubting one and a believing one.”

At Easter time we tend to present our believing side as we listen to the story of the empty tomb and Jesus’ appearances. Within many of us, however, there are some lingering questions, aren’t there? How was Jesus raised? What did he look like? And most important, what will it mean for my life? We aren’t going to answer all those questions in this brief time but let’s travel the road with “the doubting Thomas” of our scripture lesson. You may be surprised at what is discovered.

First off, is it wrong to have doubts? Should Thomas have been kicked out of the fellowship because he always was so skeptical? A basic part of my own theology and personal faith experience is that only by questioning and seeking does one grow spiritually. It scares me when I converse with Christians who seem to have all the answers and are quite complacent. I identify much more comfortably with Paul Tillich, one of the leading theologians of last century, who said, “the true Christians may not be the ones who have all the answers but those who ask the right questions.” Carl Sanburg described what many feel when he wrote “I always have enjoyed riding on a train in the car with railroaders going back to the home base. Once I saw a young fireman in overalls take a seat and slouch down easy and comfortable. After awhile a brakeman in blue uniform came along and planted himself alongside the fireman. They didn’t say anything. The 2 of them didn’t even look at each other. Then the brakeman, looking straight ahead, said ‘well, what do you know today?’ and after a long pause adding, ‘for sure.’ I remember the answer. It came slow and honest. The fireman made it plain what he knew that day for sure: ‘not a darn thing.’”

“What do you know today...for sure?” Is the church in the business of easily supplying answers or helping people live with the ambiguities of life? The shape of ministry may vary greatly depending on how a congregation answers that question. There are churches who do seem to have a rule or response to every issue while others are trying to be more open and seeking knowledge together. I could travel around the Batavia area and, regardless of denominational affiliation, Catholic or Protestant, evangelical or liberal, churches would fall on one side or the other in terms of how they approach scripture and their faith.

Sadly, from my point of view, the vast majority of people who are not in the church have the wrong impression of those who come to worship. Through the media and conversation, the idea is given that those in the church have life down pretty pat and they are sure of where they stand. I quickly learned how false that impression is when I led a Lenten Bible study in my first parish. I worried about how my searching would be greeted by these mostly older women who had been in the church for ages. I need not have worried because as we sat around a table in the church kitchen I discovered that they had just as many questions as I did!

A lot of those questions begin with the Easter event and what God was doing. For some, it simply is as the Bible said. For others, there are too many questions and an absolute literal interpretation will not do. Both views, in my estimation, are valid within our faith and, as John Eudes suggested, may exist within each of us. Speaking personally, I grew up assuming that the Biblical account of Easter was just as it stated. In college and seminary, questions were raised. Other explanations were

offered that moved into the realm of parapsychology. After many years celebrating Easter, I find myself still seeking some middle ground between literal interpretation and rational explanations. I am comfortable saying that God did something so powerful that it had a lasting impact not only on the original followers but also upon me regardless of the details of the story. I would be happy to talk to any of you who would like to discuss this matter further.

Remember I said in the beginning that Thomas was very much a person of this generation. This disciple lived with the ambiguity and uncertainty that we all face and tried to be honest about his doubts. He always seemed to be raising questions. In John 14, Jesus was talking about where he was going and the way there. It was Thomas who was skeptical and asked, "how can we know the way?" This disciple, upon hearing from the other followers about seeing the Risen Lord, might have kept his doubts to himself, but it was his nature to keep raising questions.

The gospel writer of John used Thomas to make a crucial point: "blessed are those who do not see and yet believe." The writer knew that future generations were going to have to work through lots of doubts and to set forward in faith. Jesus is not going to suddenly appear and tell us exactly how to feel or what to do. Fundamentalists may miss this very basic point when they are so insistent in having an answer for everything because John suggested that it is as we work through our uncertainties that our faith grows. One of my favorite verses in scripture takes place when a man approaches Jesus and says, "Lord, I believe. Help, thou, my unbelief." The resolution of doubt comes not with answers but rather comes from trusting that this God who loves us so much will see us through the murky waters of life and that through it all Jesus will be by our side. The intent of John 20 is to assure the early church and us that even though we cannot share with Jesus as did the original disciples still the power of the Risen Lord will be there for us.

Thomas becomes a model for how one can grow spiritually. He was asking all of these questions and yet at the same time he was living out his faith. "The Gospel of Thomas," a collection of writings that tell of the teaching of Jesus was discovered not so long ago and suggests the importance of Thomas. Further, tradition has Thomas traveling to India and establishing Christianity there. A legend maintains that a wealthy Indian prince hired Thomas to build him a magnificent castle. The prince went on a trip leaving behind a large sum of money for construction. Thomas spent all the money helping the poor of the area. When the prince returned he asked to see the castle. Thomas responded, "You cannot see it now but when you depart this life you will see it."

Thomas' life reveals a crucial point about spiritual growth. A person doesn't have to have all the answers or be absolutely certain before one begins to live out the faith. So often people have said to me, "I'm not very sure about what I believe. I don't know enough to live out my faith." That may be true and we need to keep on searching but it doesn't mean that we can't follow Thomas' example and begin to put into practice the Jesus' way. Indeed, it is as one continues to wrestle with the meaning of faith daily that new avenues of challenge and opportunity emerge.

I don't know how many "doubting Thomases" there are in Batavia. My experience is that all of us have our share of questions and doubts when our faith is challenged by life situations. In the Presbyterian tradition, there are no easy answers or ironclad guarantees. What is offered is the chance to be part of a group of people sharing together in the search for meaning and purpose in life, willing to deal with life's big issues like war and sexuality. In that sharing, praying, in disagreeing, in growing, we proclaim with confidence and joy the words of the old spiritual that we sang on Palm Sunday.

"He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus Christ, the first and last. No one works like him. No one works like him."