

Easter II April 19, 2009

The Second Sunday of Easter is very dependable. (Not just with attendance.) This is Thomas' Sunday, and every year the Gospel tells the story of Jesus' special appearance among the Apostles to greet Thomas. I've come to appreciate Thomas, (I was Rector of a St. Thomas' for a while) and I've learned a lot from him.

I have a two different things to say about Thomas' story this morning. The first one is about the disciples and faith, the second is about doubt in general. | I want to start with Thomas' unfortunate adjective. He's always called "doubting", as if the other disciples had more faith than he did, and that made Thomas a bit of a problem. But it didn't work that way. The problem really wasn't with Thomas; it was with the others.

Remember what happened. For one reason or another, Thomas was not with the others on Easter morning; (the Bible doesn't say, but I suspect he had company that weekend) so Thomas didn't share their experience of the risen Lord. That meant they had something he didn't have; and instead of their *experience*, what Thomas had was their *word* about what they had seen—and that wasn't enough.

You see, Thomas never doubted Jesus; he doubted the other Apostles. The problem was not really Thomas—the problem was the credibility of the others. *They* had seen the risen Jesus; *they* had been given his peace and his spirit; *they* had been sent by him to continue his work in the world. We heard all of that in the first part of the Gospel. It was now up to them to share the good news. That's what they were sent to do. And, bless their hearts, their witness to the resurrection was not even compelling enough to convince Thomas; and Thomas *wanted* to believe; he was *ready* to believe.

It's the same way now. The temptation is to say that the problem is out there, with all of those unbelievers like Thomas—if they would only shape up and believe better, (preferably to the point of becoming Episcopalians), then things would improve immeasurably. It's easier to do that, to complain about *them*, than it is to pay careful attention to the less-than-persuasive words and lives of today's disciples—of those who are called to be witnesses to Jesus. It feels better to call Thomas “doubting” than to call the disciples—or ourselves—unconvincing.

But Thomas is here to make us uncomfortable, not smug. Remember, faith usually comes to people through the faith of others, through the life and ministry of the Church. Virtually everyone ‘out there’ is like Thomas. Virtually everyone ‘out there’, and that includes our children and grandchildren, depends upon people who already believe to point them toward faith. Virtually everyone ‘out there’, and that includes our children and grandchildren, depends upon us.

The other disciples told Thomas, “we have seen the Lord”. But they were scared; and they were hiding behind locked doors; and they were only talking to each other. Just a week earlier, Jesus had stood among them—but you couldn't tell it from them. They sure didn't *act* like something wonderful had happened at Easter. So Thomas didn't believe them; even though he wanted to. That's the way it was; and, all too often, that's the way it still is. Thomas was not the problem. Today's doubting Thomases are not the problem. The problem is the authenticity, the power, and the persuasiveness of the Church. That's the bad news.

But there is good news here as well—Good News for the disciples (and so for us, the Church). For Christ is risen, and he comes to us. Risen, he comes to the Church; even when the Church continues to huddle in fear behind locked doors.

And he brings to completion the work that a weak and sinful collection of disciples cannot do alone. That we cannot do alone. The good news is that Jesus continues to be with us; that he continues to be for us; and that he continues to speak to us and to his world his words of forgiveness, and of peace.

This doesn't mean we are off the hook. It doesn't mean we have no responsibilities and no vocation to service. It doesn't mean that Jesus will do it all for us, and we can take it easy. But it does mean that we are able to continue—warts and all—in hope and in confidence. It does mean both that we are not alone, and that we do not need to be afraid. Sometimes we fail, as the disciples failed with Thomas. But we don't stop, and we don't give up, and we are free to do our best, even if it's risky. While there is always room for improvement, there is never cause for despair. We continue to struggle forward together, and Jesus continues to be found among us.

The heart of the story of doubting Thomas is not about doubt (Thomas' or anyone else's), it's about the call of the Church to witness to the resurrection. And the biggest piece of good news is not that Thomas comes to faith; the biggest bit of good news is that the Risen Lord still comes to his Church. That good news is for us. We are called to be witnesses to the Resurrection, and our Lord is with us. That's what I want to say about the disciples, and about faith.

At the same time, I can't let Thomas get by us without saying something about doubt, real personal, bone-deep doubt as to the truth or value of parts (or all) of this whole religious enterprise. First of all, doubt is always a part of the life of faith. There is never authentic faith without doubt; that's something we all know about. And it's not at all a bad thing at all; it's a necessary thing. Doubt happens—often in times of crisis and tragedy, sometimes just all by its own self. Faith matures with ups and downs, not in a straight line.

Anyway, I want to look at just one tiny thing about doubt, ours and his, that we can learn from Thomas' story. Did you notice that Jesus did not come to Thomas while Thomas was on the way to work, or walking the dog, or playing a round of golf, or just thinking things over? Jesus came to Thomas when Thomas was with the disciples; when he was within the fellowship of believers. Thomas was smart; he didn't believe the disciples, but he did stay with them. He knew that if his doubt was ever to be met, it would be met there—not somewhere else.

That's usually the way it is with us. Our doubts are usually met as we stay within the community of faith, as we hang in there doing the sorts of things we would be doing if we weren't bothered with doubt. It was a good thing, and not a hypocritical thing, for Thomas to stay with the others even when he didn't believe a single word they said. So it is for us. There's a very real connection between hanging around this place, and living this life, between these and the gift of meeting the Lord. That connection isn't simple, and it isn't exact, and it isn't at all predictable, but you can depend on it. He will come to us, through whatever doors we lock, through whatever barriers we build.

Sometimes, as it must have been with Thomas, what turns out to be the greatest moment of faith does not *feel* like faith at all; it feels like doubt. Sometimes what turns out to be the greatest moment of faith *feels* like just hanging on and just showing up; it feels like waiting and going through the motions. But that's all right; that's the way it works. That was what Thomas needed to do, and that was *all* Thomas needed to do.

Jesus did the rest. It still works like that.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed.