

Sermon for 5/1/11
Easter 2A

Today is the second Sunday after Easter. It's often referred to as Low Sunday. Our attendance is certainly lower than Easter and often lower than usual. Our numbers have flowed and ebbed. I find it interesting then that on this Low Sunday we celebrate Thomas, who John's gospel tells us was absent on the Sunday evening of Easter. Yet here he is present a week later, when we expect less rather than more. Thomas missed all the excitement of the week before—or else, like the rest of the disciples, he also was afraid, yet too afraid to even gather behind locked doors with them. But not only do we get an extra disciple this week than Easter night, we also get another and even greater expression of faith than happened last week. We may have heard the resounding call last week of “Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!” But this week Thomas adds to and accentuates that call with the affirming, “My Lord and My God!,” possibly the greatest confession of Jesus in the New Testament. Not only is this man who the disciples knew as Jesus risen from the dead, but because of this act—of his death on the cross for our sins and resurrection to new life again—we can see that he truly is God. And as God he is truly our Lord and Savior.

We are reminded of this fact today on Low Sunday as we remember the disciple Thomas. Thomas is an interesting character in the gospels. He doesn't appear often, only a few times that we hear about and remember. We think of him mostly as “Doubting Thomas,” though he is much more than this, and even his doubt can be refuted. We're told only a few things about Thomas, that he was one of the disciples, that he was called Didymus or the Twin, and that he made some notable statements in John's gospel.

In the eleventh chapter of the gospel, which we heard several Sundays ago, we learn of the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus. Jesus enjoins his disciples to return to Judea to be with Lazarus' sisters and as we know to eventually raise him from the dead. The disciples, however, recall that Jesus' last stay in Judea almost got him stoned. They're not eager to return there so soon. Yet Thomas speaks up courageously and encourages the disciples to go with Jesus to see Lazarus, that they may die with him. Thomas here is either incredibly brave or incredibly foolish. Does he truly understand what dying with or for Jesus might mean? How about us ourselves?

Three chapters later, when Jesus has entered Jerusalem, held the Last Supper with his disciples, and spoken to them of his impending death, he tells them not to worry but believe, because his father's house has many dwelling-places, he is going before them to prepare a place for them, and he will come and take them to that place, where they know he is going.” Yet Thomas in confusion replies, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” To which Jesus famously responds, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

And so we arrive at today's passage six chapters later. “From now on you do know him and have seen him,” Jesus said. And yet, Thomas is missing at first in today's passage when the risen Jesus shows himself to the disciples. And upon his return Thomas refuses to believe their sighting of the risen Lord, just as the disciples themselves refused to believe Mary Magdalene. But when Jesus appears to them again a week later, this doubting Thomas is in their midst, and he is invited to put his finger there and see Jesus' hands, to reach out his hand and put it in Jesus' side. He is invited not to doubt but believe. And he does so—he does indeed now know him and see him: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas does not remain doubting for long but believes indeed. Doubting Thomas has now become Believing Thomas.

We too are invited to believe, to continue believing, to hold the faith, and to spread it and share it with others. In a world where belief and doubt compete on a daily basis in our minds and our hearts, we are like Thomas invited to believe and behold the power of God, in his death for us, in his resurrection for us, and in our lives on a daily basis, reinforced by the power of the Holy Spirit which we see Jesus give to his disciples here with the words “Peace be with you.” Peace be with us indeed in our doubts and in our beliefs.

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I was reminded this week, as maybe you were as well, of the struggle between doubt and belief. In a week of seemingly more pressing issues like the devastating storms in the South or for others the Royal Wedding in England, it was hard to read or watch the news without being equally inundated by the continuing saga of the so-called Birther Movement and especially Donald Trump, in their quest to verify or invalidate the natural born citizenship of our sitting president. This saga reached what seemed its summit when the White House released Barak Obama's long-form birth certificate to public scrutiny on Wednesday. And yet as you all are no doubt aware, this in no way has acted to quell the controversy or subdue the doubt. In truth, for some, no matter how much supposed proof is provided, doubt will always remain and struggles will continue to ensue. Will "Doubting Donald" now come to believe and focus more on his own presidential campaign and less on Obama's birth, or will his personal attacks continue?

As Christians, we are left asking ourselves the question of what constitutes proof for belief. Or perhaps an even better question than that is how can we or do we believe without proof? Is a short-form or long-form birth certificate enough to believe one's natural born citizenship? Are the nail marks in this man's hands and feet and the spear mark in his side enough to believe that he is indeed the risen savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God? Can we walk the journey with Jesus alongside Thomas from courage to confusion to doubt and finally to belief? Reminding ourselves again of the other events of this past week, can we believe that out of the severe destruction of natural disasters (or so-called acts of God) that we will indeed be safe, that God will indeed rescue us and our loved ones, and that Jesus' peace will truly be offered to us? And reminded of the royal wedding of William and Kate, can we believe that the power of love is truly able to conquer all? This love that we share amongst one another. Can we truly believe in a love that God shared with us in the person of Jesus, and in his death on a cross for our sins and for our death and for our true eternal life forever in him?

I mentioned several weeks ago an understanding of the word believe as 'belove' that theologian Marcus Borg advocates. He speaks of our understanding of what it means to believe as a modern construct stuck in the mind and based on proofs and reason and rationality. And he understands the word believe in its earliest origins to be closely related to a root for 'love', in the same way that the word creed comes from a Latin root meaning 'heart.' When we recite the Nicene Creed, do we do so from our mind or from our heart? Borg declares that for himself, to believe a set of statements is impossible, yet it is possible for him to 'belove' Jesus and walk in his path. He argues that "in the pre-modern world, before about 1600, the object of belief was never a statement. It was always a person. To believe meant to 'belove' a person. To belove Jesus means more than simply loving Jesus. It means to love what Jesus loved."

As we're reminded this week of the difficulties in believing for so many in this world for a variety of reasons, might we consider what believing would mean if we were to experience it as 'beloving'? Might we, like the dear disciple Thomas, then find it easier to believe in Jesus and his resurrection, especially because we aren't able to touch the marks in his hands, feet, and side? Jesus does remind us that, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Indeed we are counted among that number, even more so than Thomas and the other disciples. Jesus calls us blessed.

And in believing and beloving Jesus, we are blessed. And we are likewise reminded that Jesus' peace which passes all understanding is with us, and his Spirit is with us, and his presence walking beside us on a daily basis is with us. In our belief we know indeed that God is with us. And through our believing Jesus has told us that we may have life in his name. Through him who God gave new life through the resurrection, we are also able to have life, and not just life here and now but life everlasting. This is indeed something that our minds and our hearts can believe in.

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