

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter 2011

In his commentary on the Gospel for today, David Lose asks us to try to forget everything we thought we knew about Thomas. The nickname *Doubting Thomas*: forget it. Also, forget that you may still think of Thomas as the inferior disciple. If you thought that Jesus rebuked him for his lack of faith—forget that too. Why? It isn't true.

Thomas is not anywhere in John's Gospel described as "the doubter." When Jesus declares his intention to return to Judea—and the other disciples try to dissuade him because they know it will mean his death, it is Thomas who encourages the others to follow Jesus "so that we may die with him" (11:16). Thomas is not so much a doubter as he is a realist.

A few days earlier, Thomas saw his friend and lord nailed to the cross and die. Now, when his friends tell him that they've seen the Lord, he reacts with a realist's skepticism, kind of like a terminally ill patient who has accepted his fate might react to news of a new "miracle cure."

Did you notice that what Thomas asks for is exactly what all the other disciples had already received? When Jesus appeared to the other disciples he showed them his hands and his side and only then, John records, did the disciples rejoice "because they saw the Lord" (20:20). Despite his bad rap, Thomas is no worse than the other disciples. More importantly, we may have actually misunderstood the nature of faith altogether, assuming that the "more" faith we have the fewer questions we are supposed to ask.

The Bible offers a different picture of faith, one in which faith and doubt are woven much closer together than we might imagine. Faith, after all, isn't knowledge but instead "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews: 11:1).

Jesus' words at the end of today's reading are not really about Thomas. After all, who are "those who have believed and not seen"? Well, it starts with the members of the early Christian community to whom John writes...and continues to include all of us. That's right: Jesus isn't so much rebuking Thomas as he is blessing us.

Looked at this way, far from standing as the doubter that Jesus rebukes, Thomas emerges as a model disciple in John's gospel. Or, more accurately, he's the model of how one becomes a disciple. Thomas is no fool, but rather comes at things realistically and counts the cost. Once he has encountered Jesus, his faith is as realistic as was his skepticism, as he doesn't merely believe but also makes the chief confession in John's gospel, acclaiming Jesus not only as "my Lord"—the title reserved for Caesar in the first century—but also "my God," the highest praise of Jesus made in the New Testament and an echo of the opening line of John's Gospel.

Little wonder that John follows this scene with his own two-sentence purpose statement: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). In other words, what happens to Thomas is exactly what John hopes will happen to each of us when we read his story.

So do we know this to be true: that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an essential ingredient? That hardboiled realism is an asset to vibrant faith? As we prepare to baptize Delaney this morning, she should learn from parents and godparents, and especially from this community of faith that she is encouraged to bring her questions and skepticism, as well as their insights and trust, to her life of faith. She will learn that faith is something we seek before God indeed finds us. Paradoxically, God finds us most often when we surrender to our emptiness and our lack of faith.

Encourage Delaney to read about the lives of the saints. In the lives of these saints Delaney and all of us can find those who will inspire our faith. St. Athanasius, whose life we remember on this Delaney's baptismal day, wrote: "*The Savior of us all, the Word of God, in his great love took to himself a body and moved as man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, half way. He became himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the*

works which he, the Word of God, did in the body. Human and human-minded as men were, therefore, to whichever side they looked in the sensible world, they found themselves taught the truth.”

Or Catherine of Siena mentioned in Bishop of London’s sermon at William and Catherine’s wedding, Catherine of Siena reminds us in speaking of Christ: *The human heart is drawn by love, and with all its powers: memory, understanding, and will. If these three powers are harmoniously united in my name, everything else you do, in fact or intention, will be drawn to union with me in peace through the movement of love, because all will be lifted up in the pursuit of crucified love.*

Finally as the Bishop of London said to the two billion of us watching the wedding from the words of St. Catherine: Delaney, *“Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”*