

Second Sunday of Easter

Lectionary B, John 20:19-31

Trinity Church, April 8, 2018

The Apostle Thomas usually gets a bad rap for wanting some proof that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. This earned him the title “doubting Thomas.”

According to the punch line of the story it appears that one shouldn't need to see proof to believe.

In this story Jesus appears to the disciples and says, “Peace be with you.” Then he shows them the wounds in his hands and side.

When the disciples tell Thomas,

“We have seen the Lord,” Thomas doesn’t believe them. He says, “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.”

Jesus appears another time when Thomas is present. He instructs Thomas to touch his wounds. Jesus then says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Marcus Borg reflecting on this story wrote that when he was growing up the only thing worse

than being a “doubting Thomas” was to be a “Judas.” The implication was, “We should believe, not be skeptical or inquisitive. Don’t be a doubting Thomas.” He goes on to say that he heard a conservative Christian apologist describe Thomas’ sin as refusing to accept the apostolic witness of the other disciples.

This is the interpretation that I grew up with too. But I was delighted to read that Borg, one of the finest biblical scholars of recent years, noted that “unless we inflect the closing words of the story with an accusatory tone of

voice, there is no condemnation of Thomas. Thomas desired his own firsthand experience of the risen Jesus, and his desire was granted; Jesus appeared to him. The closing words of Jesus can be read without condemnation: ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’ They simply affirm that those who believe without firsthand experience of the risen Jesus are also blessed, but they do not condemn those who, like Thomas, hunger and thirst for such an experience.” (“Jesus:

Uncovering the Life, Teachings,
and Relevance of a Religious
Revolutionary,” pp. 286-287)

In our spiritual journeys we are not likely to see visions like those recorded in the gospels, which may have been real or parabolic to express the post-Easter Christian confession of faith that Jesus lives and Jesus is Lord. But like Thomas we want to have some experience of the risen Lord in our lives. We are not content to simply adhere to traditional orthodoxy as our evidence. As it has been said, “Only the truth you

discover for yourself has the power of truth for you.”

While we don't expect visions of a resurrected Christ, we understand that we live in both a visible and invisible world. And the invisible is understood not by what we see, but by what we feel in an emotional or spiritual way. The purpose of a birthday party, for example, does not rest solely on the birthday cake. As H. A. Williams describes it, “If in a birthday cake you see only sugar, flour, butter and egg, then it isn't truly a birthday cake. It is a birthday cake only in so far as it

points beyond itself to the celebration it has been made to mark. The sugar, flour, butter, egg—our danger in this scientific age is that of reducing everything to its constituent parts so that the world becomes no more than a heap of dismantled machinery.”

If we compare this analogy to seeing a resurrected Christ, it is not by putting our hands into Jesus’ wounds that validates the living Christ, but to see in our relationship to Christ how our lives can be resurrected to new life after our own Good Fridays. Perhaps

you have a story of your own to tell as others do.

It is very much like the Holy Communion we receive on Sundays. You don't come forward to get a little piece of bread and a sip of wine. As Michael and I look into your eyes when you come to the altar rail you have brought more than a desire for a little piece of bread and a sip of wine. You bring your whole lives to our Lord to receive the consecration elements that have become for you the body and blood of Christ. In a mystical way you are nurtured by the giving of yourselves to our

Lord and by receiving God's presence into your life under the forms of bread and wine. Christ becomes present for you as if you were at the last supper. The elements of bread and wine, like the ingredients of the birthday cake, are not the meaning of the experience. The meaning comes from the invisible reality of the divine presence.

And now back to Thomas. Thomas deserves our praise rather than being maligned as a doubter. Thomas wanted to experience the risen Christ himself. And there is nothing wrong with doubting.

Doubt helps us to discard beliefs that are not true. The earth isn't flat; the sun doesn't rotate around the earth; the universe wasn't created in six days, etc. Previously the affirmation of these beliefs was held to be true. A preferable practice is to open the shells of old beliefs to learn more about them. If true, rejoice. If not true, rejoice that you have a new perspective on the subject. This process, in fact, is the routine of the spiritual journey. We let go of our assumed certainties to discover that there is more in the world of spiritual realities. Each new adventure

teaches us to love and trust the ultimate reality of our being. We call this reality God, the Source, the Ground of our Being, and many other names that can't capture the astounding miracle of this mysterious life. Enjoy the process, even if you have to question where you are standing.