

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina
Easter 2 (3 April 2005):*

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

The Doubting Thomas in Us All

“What’s in a name?” the poet mused. I wonder what response the Apostle Thomas might offer, if he were asked this same question. I mean, how would you like to have your name prefaced perpetually by the moniker “Doubting”?

Historically, we don’t know a whole lot about Thomas. Like most of Jesus’ disciples, a biographical resume was not the purpose of their lives. Ministry and mission were. Nonetheless, we are given some glimpses of Thomas as a member of the original Twelve, glimpses that reveal some of his historically hidden humanity.

For instance, we can see that he was a fiercely loyal man, with a good deal of courage. We can see this in Thomas from the scene in John’s gospel (11:8) that immediately precedes Lazarus’s raising. Jesus, in order to reach the fatally ill Lazarus, must re-enter the territory in which his enemies have only recently tried to kill him. Yet, Jesus’ love for Lazarus is greater than this threat of danger, and he announces that he will risk the danger in order to minister to his desperately ill friend. One can easily imagine the sick look on the disciples’ faces over this news. After all, it’s not just Jesus’ neck that is in danger over this return trip.

When Jesus makes the purpose of this trip plain, saying that Lazarus is dead and that his presence to Lazarus is to make a point about life with God and belief in Jesus, Thomas suddenly emerges into view. Jumping into the sticky situation with both feet, Thomas blurts out: “Let’s go, too, so we that can die with him.”

Clearly, Thomas does not understand what he is saying, but his unabashed enthusiasm and loyalty as a follower of Jesus is palpable. We all need someone like Thomas in our lives to blow the trumpet and to sound the charge, especially when hearts are faint.

A second gospel scene also mentions Thomas in rather a famous light. This one comes within the context of Jesus saying “goodbye” to his followers on the Thursday night of his arrest. Having shared the Passover with the Twelve and then demonstrated the nature of their ministries by washing the Disciples’ feet, Jesus speaks of his departure, of going where they cannot follow. It is all a very unsettling scene.

Trying to calm the increasingly raw nerves of the Twelve, Jesus tells his charges not to be troubled, that he will return to them to take them “home” because they all know where Jesus is going. As if on cue, Thomas pipes up again and gives voice to what everyone else was wondering but too reticent to say. “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” (John 14:5)

In addition to eliciting from Jesus his monumental statement that he is the “way, the truth, and the life,” we also see in this scene an unpretentious honesty and directness to Thomas’s character.

He does not hold back, even when such up-frontness would risk embarrassing himself.

But of course, it is the third appearance in the gospel narrative that gains Thomas historical notice. It is the scene that we have read this morning.

In John’s expression of Easter, our attention is brought to the evening of that eventful day. The disciples are huddled in a room, behind locked doors, for fear of their enemies, when the risen Christ suddenly and unexpectedly appears in their midst. Again in John’s condensed telling, this is the first appearance of the risen one to the Twelve. As with other post-resurrection appearances, shock and confusion immediately spring up from the disciples. Yet, Jesus overcomes their mutual surprise by greeting them and by extending his calming peace to them. He shows them the wounds on his body, greets them again with his peace; and then dramatically breathes the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit upon them so that they may continue in the reality of his risen life and ministry. But Thomas is not there.

Perhaps the combination of his courage and his need for directness led him to search the city to discover first-hand what the others were too fearful to face. In any event, upon Thomas’s return to his cohorts, he is told the unexpected and joyful Easter news. And as you are well-aware, this is the telling point. Thomas insists on gaining concrete evidence for himself about the veracity of their proclamation, which, in turn, wins him his timeless moniker: “Doubting Thomas.”

“What’s in a name?”

“Doubting Thomas:” Do you think that the sound of this title irritated Thomas, like rubbing salt into a wound? (Can you imagine your daughter introducing him as your future son-in-law? “Dad, Mom: I want you to meet my fiancée: Doubting Thomas.”) Or do you think it hurt his feelings, having to endure the memory of his skepticism by this name? Or could it have turned out to be a badge of honor? After all, he gives so much expression to our own internal strife over the issue of faith in Jesus that I think Thomas can be called our unofficial patron saint.

“What’s in a name, ‘Doubting Thomas’?”

In the cathedral of my heart, I have a special chapel in honor of Thomas. It is a place I visit often and know well. It is a place – a sacred place – where I tend my doubts. It is a place where I pray my doubts.

I hope that what I am about to say is patently obvious to all of you. Nonetheless, it bears repeating because it is so crucially important. To mature faith and to a healthy spirit. Here’s what it is: Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Fear is. And fear’s presence can

always be spotted when people become more concerned with not making mistakes (or being caught in a mistake) than they are with the actual living in God's Communion.

Fear's presence causes us to strive for certitude so that there are no doubts. Everything is clear and orderly; and all you have to do is follow the recipe and just add water. But Communion, life with God in the reality of the risen Christ, is not about certitude. It is about fidelity.

You can prove a math problem: two and two are four; but you cannot prove love. but you cannot prove love. Love, like life, requires presence; and presence – that is, being in Communion – is never only a matter of following a recipe.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. No, rather doubt is the “ants in the pants of faith,” to quote the reliable spiritual guide and teacher, Frederick Buechner. Doubts are normal. They signal that there is more for us to learn and more for us to become than we presently know or presently are. Doubts indicate that we have approached a threshold. The question is not how to get rid of our doubts but what to do with them.

Specifically, will we use our doubts to grow in God and his Christ and to step over the immediate threshold into something new and larger; or will we use our doubts fearfully as excuses to stay the same?

“What's in a name?” At the very least, Thomas –Doubting Thomas – was mature and emotionally honest enough to own his own doubts. He didn't blame others for them. He didn't foist their weight onto someone else's shoulders. No, at the very least he took responsibility for his doubts and named them publicly.

Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in t he mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.

Why do you think the writer of the Fourth Gospel tells this story? I mean, if you want heroes to follow in the faith, why reveal such frailty?

Perhaps the reason is that by the end of the first century (when John's gospel was composed), the issue of believing in the risen Jesus without benefit of his post-resurrection appearances was a growing problem. And if this is so (and I believe it is), then how far away from this same experience are we? Not very far. So, once again, we find ourselves kneeling in Doubting Thomas's chapel, sometimes with folded and prayerful hands, sometimes with clenched fists. “Seeing's believing.”

Yet, what is there to be seen? What did Thomas see? The rest of the gospel reading speaks directly to this very point.

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The scene swiftly changes with the next words: “Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.”

“Eight days” is a bit strange, don’t you think? Why “eight days” and not “a week later?” “Why not “the next Sunday”?” Allow me to suggest to you that the combination of this report of “eight days” and what happens next are keys to what Thomas saw and, indeed, what you and I can see – if we dare to look.

First, while the reference to the “eighth day” may be the exact time frame between Jesus’ two post-resurrection appearances, there is, nonetheless, also a larger message being conveyed to John’s community and to us; and it has to do with the over-arching purpose and perspective of the Fourth Gospel. For instance, all of us should be familiar with the opening lines of this gospel, because for many of us they form the theological meat of Christmas.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” In him was life, and the life was the light of [all] (John 1:1-5). The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The essence of what these gospel words are saying is that in Christ Jesus, who is the Creator’s own Word, a whole new creation has occurred. In a direct allusion to the opening lines of Genesis and to the significance of creation, John hopes that his readers will remember that on the sixth day, God created humanity in God’s own image and made us the crown of all creation. And on the seventh day, God rested with satisfaction that all that the Holy One had made was “very good.”

But between that creation event and our own history, we know that life has become infected with fear and death, to the extent that life, itself, has become distorted and very frequently “not good.” So, John implicitly says, with Jesus’ death and resurrection, creation is restored, made new. And on the “eighth day,” that divine redemption and restoration is unveiled, in a way that all of us can see and see concretely. John’s proclamation is that Jesus resurrection begins new life for the entire cosmos.

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.” (John. 20:26-27)

How do we see the risen Christ for ourselves? How do we participate in the new creation?

Profoundly, Christ’s resurrection can be seen wherever there is pain and suffering, wherever there is woundedness and death. That’s how it worked for Thomas. That’s how it works for us, too.

Dare we look into the pain of our own lives? Not usually. Dare we look into the pain of others? No, it's really too scary and too risky to do that. But if we do this, when we dare to touch the places in life that harbor death's power, we will see resurrection, and we will experience Easter.

Someone from another place and time used to remind me every once in a while when I was down that being a Christian entails the reality of death and resurrection. It is our headline, our motto, our banner. Death and resurrection. Like most people, I like resurrection a lot, but it doesn't come until death – in all its forms – is acknowledged and accepted.

We all have our doubts. This seems quite normal to me. The key is what we do with them. Do we use them as excuses for staying the same, for avoiding our deepest fears? Or do we use them to cause us to leap ahead from what we know to what God knows?

The very first Sunday after Easter Day is always about Doubting Thomas. In fact, as your bulletin indicates, the tradition calls this day "Thomas Sunday." I believe there is a good reason for this. We're not allowed to stand around, gawking at Jesus, wondering if it's all true; but we are already being propelled ahead to join the risen Christ in living resurrection every day, to see and to touch that fear and death no longer reign. And the best place to see this for ourselves is to apply our doubts to our pain, to those fearful places, and see what arises.

But as with Thomas, this doesn't happen on our own. He needed his friends for help; and so do we!

Christ is risen. Alleluia! Amen.