



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Second Sunday of Easter – April 11, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 John 1:1-2.2, John 20:19-31

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning, I think we should do something. We should try to forget, for a moment, everything we thought we knew about the disciple Thomas. Notice that I didn't say "Doubting Thomas," because his nickname – the name he's been stuck with for posterity - is probably the first thing we need to forget. So, forget that somewhere along the way you came to believe that Thomas' primary attribute is doubt. Forget that you still think of him as a slightly inferior disciple because of it. Forget all of that because I think we need to go back to the biblical story and try to see things a little differently – to recast the memory if you like.

Traditionally the church has approached this interchange between Thomas and Jesus negatively. That's to say that Thomas' unbelief has been an example of how not to behave when someone tells you the Messiah has risen.

Traditionally, the rebuke implicit in this story is that Thomas should have believed that Jesus was risen, because the disciples said so. There might also be an underlying message here that the disciples in turn should have believed Jesus had risen because Mary Magdalene said so. That's what Jesus is getting at right – when he says - "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Well, let's put that over here with pin in it for a few minutes.

We'll come back to that.

So eight days before this encounter, Jesus had breathed the life-giving Holy Spirit into the disciples – but not into Thomas. For some reason Thomas isn't with them when the Lord appeared to the disciples. Thomas is left out – left behind. And in this Thomas' faith in the risen Lord is a step behind the rest of the disciples.

Fast forward to today. You know, I'm not sure that we've always known what to do with this encounter. Who among us doesn't feel a twinge of understanding and sympathy at Thomas' unwillingness to accept the disciples' version of events? I mean, fair enough – the guy's supposed to be dead. And here Thomas' friends are telling him that the report of Jesus' death, to quote Mark Twain "was greatly exaggerated."

So when the disciples come saying that they had seen Jesus, maybe I'm crazy but I don't think that Thomas doubts them. I think he just doesn't believe them in the first place. It's very similar I think to Mary meeting Jesus in the Garden early in the morning on the first day of the week. She couldn't see that the gardener was Jesus because she didn't admit the possibility of him being there in the first place.

And so I suspect that his demand to see and feel the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands is less a request for proof than it is contempt of the disciple's tall tale. He says it this way, precisely because he knows it'll never happen. It's a ridiculous thing to say and he knows it.

And if you think about it, in showing his disbelief, Thomas risks a lot. He risks breaking the bond of the group – of literally breaking faith with his fellow disciples over this. He risks isolating himself from their company and more seriously also from what they know and believe based on their experience.

But I think it says rather a lot about both parties that not only is Thomas allowed his unbelief, but that he does not seem to be punished for it. I mean, he's not frozen out. And I so appreciate that about this story.

But Jesus doesn't leave Thomas out of that experience for long. When he returns a week later, it's so that Thomas can also inspect the wounds of the Messiah and receive his peace – the gift of the Spirit.

And that's where the impact of the whole story lay. When Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord what changes is not that he is no longer a doubter – because he never really was – you have to believe in order to doubt.

No, what changes is his perception of reality itself. Of what is possible. Of what God can do. Of the possibilities that have been opened up. Of what God can do through him. And this encounter is also meant to show us what God can do through us all. See, when God shows up everything changes.

Jesus comes and takes Thomas' contemptuous words and turns them back on him, not I think to humiliate him but to confront him with the possibility that his reality was too small, that his vision is too limited. And when Jesus calls him to faith, he's actually inviting him to enter into a whole new world. And what underpins that new world is another resonance from scripture: For with God nothing is impossible!

Maybe you'll remember that that is what the angel Gabriel said to Jesus' Mother Mary at the annunciation. Jesus' birth and his resurrection are reality and possibility altering events.

And for his part, once it becomes clear that all is as the disciples and Mary Magdalene have been saying – that they are not delusional, that in fact the Lord lives, Thomas does not stay in his unbelieving state. There is a clear change from unbelief to belief and from distrust to trust. And we get that very profound moment for Thomas, just as there was for the rest of the disciples, in which he inspects Jesus' wounds – a moment which is captured evocatively – and in a rather uncomfortably graphic way - in a very beautiful painting I just love by the great Caravaggio called “The Incredulity of St. Thomas” where you see Thomas stick his finger in Jesus' wounds. This is the moment when he says – I can only imagine with profound humility and wonder: “My Lord and my God!”

So how are we to understand this story of Thomas? – because it's very clear that this is an important story – one that the Gospel writer comments on himself – coming into the narrative in a way that he only does a few times.

Perhaps if we understand Thomas' situation as a stage in his journey of understanding, it would be more helpful. Because it may be that Thomas lives for us the experience of becoming a disciple – a follower of the risen Lord. After all, he moves through several stages in the journey of faith right before our eyes in the Gospel. First, he belongs to the group of disciples – and while Jesus is alive, follows the group – does what they do. He even seems to have a particular grasp of what the realities of Jesus' ministry were – he was the one to point out that death might be the natural outcome of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem earlier in the Gospel. It seems perhaps that in this part of his life, his faith is in Jesus his teacher.

But his encounter with the risen Christ in the Gospel today seems to me to be the next stage on from there. Here, Thomas is experiencing a step in his faith journey in which he has asked himself “Can Jesus have risen?” and has said no. And he decides what kind of evidence he'd need in order to be convinced. But essentially, the whole idea is ludicrous.

This stage of Thomas' journey is the searching stage. Goodness only knows the feelings he went through – I imagine that he wanted to believe. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Not to feel left out, left behind, not to be the only one who feels flat. But he just couldn't get there on his own. But Jesus doesn't leave him in this stage for long – he gives him the gift of faith and strength in the Holy Spirit. And more than that too. He expands Thomas' whole concept of reality – of what is possible. All the categories of reality were kind of thrown out of the window in that moment for Thomas. Pretty mind-bending.

This is something we all fall prey to - this tendency to have too small a vision of reality. I often fall into a worldview governed by limitations and I am tempted to call that “realism.” I am tempted to shut down dreams and make things manageable, realistic, and responsible.

And that’s when I need to have the community of faith to remind me to lift my head, to look up and remember that I am an Eastered person – I stand with Thomas after he has seen the Lord. And therefore as Christians, we must have a different vision – one that’s not defined by failure but by possibility beyond what we can conceive, one that’s not limited by scarcity but defined by abundance, one that’s not ruled by remembered offenses but set free by forgiveness and reconciliation.

That’s a different reality – a transformed reality - that we’ve been invited to. That’s what it means to be the church: to have our view of the world challenged with the possibility of something more – even and especially when it looks like death is all around and is limiting us hard.

This isn’t always easy, goodness knows. Life is real, and life is difficult, and sometimes life is both, like right now – the crisis we are living through which has stretched on through another Easter - and it would be easy for our vision to contract to become small and manageable. We have been in a season where just managing is challenging – and when our vision runs the danger of contracting – sometimes to just our four walls.

It’s good to name that. A third wave is challenging. But as I – as we have all – learned over this past year - it’s also good to resist it – to dig deep and to lay hold of the expansive hope of change that the risen Christ offers to us.

It’s important to name these things and then to give them up to the God who raised Jesus from the dead; the God who gave Thomas this experience:

“Jesus focused his attention on Thomas. “Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don’t be unbelieving. Believe.” Thomas said, “My Master! My God!”

I think that this story receives special attention in the Gospel because it is important. I think it’s there because God blesses doubt as a part of human experience. I love that – because doubt is a result of our critical faculties- a result of our God-given ability to think. I think it’s there in the Gospel because it’s real. It shows us perhaps some of the stages that we might go through in order to arrive at a faith that is owned, a faith that is intentionally appropriated not simply accepted; so that it is not shiny and perfect and uncontested, but challenged by deep thought and scholarship, and by being bashed about by life experience – but, still standing, resilient and nourishing.

I value this story so deeply. I love this narrative. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has never been easy to accept. It can only be explained in human terms up to a point and after that, well, it's a matter of faith – a matter of belief in God's power and loving intent. It must be struggled with, it must be questioned: I mean not changed or softened or rationalized so that we make it somehow easier, but struggled with - as it is.

That is the challenge of faith.

It also shows the patience of the community as we journey through those stages. As scholars point out, we don't know what the rest of the disciples thought about Thomas' attitude. But he was still with them despite his vocal disbelief. And I think that says a lot about how that community of believers held him in a "you'll see" kind of space. And of course, he did see.

So perhaps, rather than calling him "Doubting Thomas" -- a person whose behaviors we should avoid; what if we called him "Confessing Thomas?" Because Thomas surrendered to his certainty once he'd got hold of it. And then he was ready to go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel – and for Thomas – St. Thomas - that meant going to the ends of the known world to do so. The tradition of St. Thomas is that he is the only disciple to travel outside of the Roman Empire – as far as India to preach the Gospel. He is in fact, the patron saint of India.

And that illustrates a fundamental truth about Easter for us too - it is not just about celebrating the wonder of the event, it is being sent back into the world, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to bear witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus.

So that brings us finally back to the ordinary people – me and you – whom the disciples, and especially Thomas today - represent. Surely the point of these post-Easter events in John's gospel is to show us that it's now up to the ecclesia – the assembly of the people – the church - to carry on the ministry and mission of Jesus?

And remember that thing over here with a pin in it that we started with? The bit where Jesus says to Thomas, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing?"

That bit is actually for us – we who at the distance of time cannot be the first witnesses of the resurrection but who can see ourselves in Thomas' story and can resonate with his unbelieving, and then again with his profound belief. As the writer of 1st John puts it: We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.

That this is the point of the story is clear when John the Gospel writer says next, “Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.”

In other words, what happens to Thomas is exactly what John hopes will happen to each of us when we read his story. This is John’s whole agenda in writing a Gospel in the first place. And we know from the distance of history that this is not a linear progression, it has many hitches and bumps and even reversals and remissions along the way. You know, that’s why we belong to the community of believers – when we cannot believe on our own – when we are reluctant or having a spiritually difficult or dry time – the church sustains our prayers and our siblings in Christ carry us until we’re able to believe again. That was Thomas’ experience – and a beautiful and loving one.

But one thing is for sure – for absolute sure: belief, once arrived at, is a gift – it’s a gift to be offered to others so that we all may walk in the light. So that our joy may be complete. So that we and the whole world might know God’s love and be free.

And so we say Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.