

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish
Newark, DE
The Second Sunday of Easter – April 23, 2017/Year A
Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31
Dr. Jordan Kinsey

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight,
Oh Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.

Please be seated.

Well if it wasn't immediately obvious, it sure will be in just a couple minutes: I am not Father Paul.

And if you're wondering what I'm doing up here, I don't blame you, and I will explain.

A couple months ago, during the time of mutual invitation bible study with which your vestry begins every meeting here at St. Thomas - during that time of shared reflection on the holy scripture that we servant leaders spend together before we dare to embark upon the business of the church - I mentioned that St. Thomas - "doubting Thomas" - has long been my favorite apostle. And I shared how fitting I believed it to be that this imperfect apostle was the namesake of this, our beautifully imperfect church. And then we moved on with the meeting.

A couple weeks later, I received an email from our Rector. Our beloved, patient, longsuffering, mischievous, one-might-even-say rascally Rector. Now I don't remember exactly what the email said, but it was something like "Hey since you love Thomas so much..."

You know - My mother has been telling me for 35 years that my life would be a lot easier if I would just learn to keep my mouth shut. And for 35 years, as the spoiled rotten baby of six that I am, I have been almost entirely ignoring her.

And so here we are. With Thomas. Thomas the Doubter.

The thing about Thomas is that the gospel doesn't give us the whole story. Not even close. All today's gospel reading tells us is that Christ came back, walked through the locked door into that room where His disciples were, showed them the wounds in His hands and His side, and they believed. And rejoiced. And that Thomas wasn't there.

What the Gospel doesn't tell us, and what has always appeared to me to be a glaring omission, is where Thomas was.

So for millennia now, we humans have assumed the worst. "Well he must've just been skipping church." "I bet he was hung over." And so he gets stuck with this nickname, for which he will be known for thousands of years: Doubting Thomas.

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But the Gospel doesn't tell us why he wasn't there, and there's every reason to believe that he had a valid excuse. There could've been a sickness in his family. Or even a death. Or some other true emergency that prevented him from being in the room just that minute.

I don't know - Maybe he had Army Reserve duty that weekend.

Or maybe, just maybe, Thomas had just witnessed his Lord taken away. Beaten. Nailed to a cross, and crucified. Maybe Thomas didn't understand. And maybe Thomas was having some doubts.

For whatever reason, Thomas arrives and all the other disciples tell him Jesus was just here. I'll bet they even said to him something like, "Thomas, you won't believe this!"

And he doesn't believe it. Thomas tells them, "Unless I see it for myself, and can touch his wounds, I won't believe."

Have you ever wondered how Thomas must have felt right then? Were the disciples pranksters, maybe, and he thought they were playing a joke on him? Or were they telling the truth, and if so, why hadn't Jesus stayed around for him to see him too?

All he knew was that the other ten remaining disciples were in on something, and he wasn't.

But the next week, and here's perhaps my main point today, Thomas is back. He comes back. And he still hasn't seen Jesus. But he comes back anyway. And all of a sudden the same thing happens. Jesus appears and tells Thomas to put his hands on his, and feel the wounds from the nails. And he does. And he believes.

Jesus asks him, "Do you believe because you have seen me?" And Jesus tells him, "Blessed are those who do not see yet believe."

I've always felt bad for Thomas. In that interim week, when he was deciding whether or not to go back to meet with the disciples, he was asked to do what the others didn't have to do. He had to believe sight unseen. Probably any of the others would have had the same struggle. And yet, we all know Thomas as "doubting Thomas". I wonder how long after this happened did it take for the other disciples to call him that. "Oh, that's doubting Thomas. Jesus had to come and let him touch his hands before he believed."

I'd hate to be remembered by only my greatest moment of doubt. Because I've had them. You could call me "Doubting Jordan," and the vast majority of the time, you'd be right. And I guess a lot of us could be something similar. But as much as Thomas sort of gets this label as the disciple who didn't believe, he's always been my favorite. Because of all of them he's the one I think most of us can relate to.

Because most of us, as Episcopalians, understand what it is to live in that space between faith and doubt.

We think of faith and doubt as opposites. But that's not really true. Faith and apathy are more opposite than faith and doubt. But doubt is often a key part of the journey of faith. It's a stop along the way that most of us make more than once. And when we find ourselves there, it's not an indication of us being bad Christians or disbelievers. It's a sign that we are taking our relationship with God seriously enough that we are letting ourselves be honest, and we are letting ourselves start a journey without knowing exactly sure where we are going.

Thomas was like that. As much as he is "doubting Thomas", he's also known to millions as Saint Thomas. Because of all the 12 apostles, Thomas was the one who travelled the farthest to spread the Gospel. Thomas died and was buried in India. Over 3000 miles from Jerusalem. It's almost to China. Thomas the Doubter did not let his doubt stop him from living out his faith. He did not sit around and wait until he knew all the answers before he got to work.

In the end it was his doubt, his desire to know Jesus for himself, that brought him faith. And that faith gave him the strength to bring that message to so many others. And if you go to India today, St. Thomas is the one who didn't just doubt, but who believed, and who helped others to do so as well.

But Thomas was lucky, right? I mean, he got to see Jesus, to touch Jesus, to know Jesus, in a way you and I don't. Doubting Thomas may have become a saint, but what hope is there for me, or for you?

Well, let me tell you about a woman. A woman, in her 30's, who one day had this overwhelming spiritual experience. She knew God was present, and she felt God calling her to do something new, and scary, and hard. But she felt God so clearly that day, that she couldn't deny it. It's the sort of spiritual experience most of us want. The moment of clarity. The clear marching orders. It's like Thomas getting to touch Jesus' hand.

The young woman did go out, and for the next 50 years she did amazing things. But inside she doubted. She wrestled with faith. She had what Christian writers for centuries have called a "dark night of the soul".

Sometimes she even questioned the existence of God.

Her lack of faith bothered her.

The other disciples may have called her, "Doubting Theresa". But you and I know her as Mother Theresa, and as of September of last year, Saint Theresa.

When I see pictures of Mother Theresa or people like her, I often catch myself thinking: they must be so holy. So full of faith. They must be so certain of what they are doing. But in the last few years, we've learned that for Mother Theresa at least, this wasn't the case. She was like us. And she was like Thomas.

We all doubt. At least all of us who see faith as a journey, and not a one time stop. Our faith gets shaken, we question it, we wonder why Jesus doesn't appear to us when everyone around us seems to have seen him. We may even feel a bit ashamed of our doubt.

I wonder if Thomas did that first week. Why couldn't he just accept what the others said? Why did he have to see for himself? I wonder if the next Sunday he thought about not going back. He wasn't "one of them" anymore. He was the doubter. The one who hadn't seen.

And yet, he went back. And maybe he went back because he had loved Jesus so much that he needed to hear them talk about him, even if he wasn't so convinced it was true yet. Maybe he went back because it was easier than being alone. Maybe he went back because he thought maybe, just maybe, Jesus would come again. For whatever reason, he went back to that community in his hour of greatest doubt, just like many of you come here every week, and that was the day Jesus showed up and he believed.

Doubt can be the thing that propels us to faith. It can be what shakes us up. It can be what pushes us out of the doors of our once comfortable places and into a new, and better, world. Doubt can be the ticket that starts our journey to new life. It can be a sign not of the absence of God, but of God working in us to do something new.

Many of you know that I was raised in the independent Baptist faith, in West Kentucky. In my childhood church, women were not permitted to speak, or to wear pants, or to hold any position of leadership. Many of the women in our church wore head coverings to demonstrate submission to their husbands.

And let me tell you: this was a community in which there was no room for doubt. The most important thing: more important than anything else: more important than compassion: more important than love: was being right. Having all the answers. Having "the truth." Because we had it, and nobody else did.

When I was 18, my parents made the fatal mistake of sending me away to college. And at the very beginning of my liberal arts education was a two-semester sequence of World History. And almost immediately, in that first semester I think it was, I learned that there have been a great number of people throughout history who thought they had "the truth." And I learned that it is just this type of extremism that has led to some of the darkest chapters in human history.

Parents: let me give you a little bit of advice. If you have raised your children to have a weak faith: a faith that can't stand up to the complexities of human history: a faith that can't survive doubt, then for Pete's sake: keep your children away from historians.

(I joke, but I can tell you that my family's faith community learned their lesson with my generation. Now parents in that group of churches are told to not allow their students to attend college. Or public school, for that matter.)

At the same time that I was learning these truths about human history, I was finally admitting to myself, (who, it turns out, was the hardest person to convince) that not only was I gay but that I most definitely had been born gay - That I had been created this way by God. The same God who had every intention of sending me to hell and torturing me for all eternity because He had made me gay. And then, my family's church found out, and I was publicly excommunicated. And that's how my parents got to find out. It should come as little to surprise to you that I then entered into a period in which I identified as an Atheist.

And it was an honest identification. I was, in fact, an Atheist. The only God I had ever been taught about - the hellfire and brimstone God - the God who sent unsaved babies and aborted fetuses and people who just happened to have been born in the wrong part of the world that the gospel hadn't gotten to yet to hell where he would then proceed to torture them for all eternity. The God who on one hand would say "God is Love" and that the greatest commandment was to "love your neighbor as yourself" and who would create these gay and lesbian and transgender people who were without a doubt the most beautiful and most loving people I had ever encountered in His entire creation and then send them to the same hell because they were gay or lesbian or transgender.

Yeah - that God? Doesn't exist. Didn't exist then, doesn't exist now.

And it was during that time - the time in my life of greatest doubt - My own "Dark Night of the Soul" - that I was introduced to the life and ministry of Gene Robinson, the Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire at the time, and the first openly gay man to ever be ordained a Bishop in the worldwide Anglican communion. He was also born in Kentucky, and raised in a faith tradition not all that different from the one I was raised in. He has since become one of my major heroes in the Church.

In one of Bishop Robinson's more famous sermons, he talks about the parting of the Red Sea. And how we all have this movie version in our heads where Moses lifted his arms and the waters parted and there was a wide open path of totally dry land (no mud) and you could see all the way across to the other side.

But again, the scripture doesn't tell us any of that. And Bishop Robinson doesn't believe that version of the story. The reality, he says, was more like this: the people put one foot into the water, tentatively, and the waters rolled back a little. Just enough for that one step. And then they put another foot down, and the waters rolled back more. And so on, and so on, until they found they had safely reached the other shore.

It's the same with doubt. You won't see to the other shore. And you don't have to. God is already there. And God is with you in the waters. Doubt as much as you need to, but leave just enough room for the faith that God will show you the next right step. And just keep putting one foot in front of the other. That's the life of doubt, and that's the life of faith.

Amen