

Sermon: Easter 2

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Year B
Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

The last time that I spoke here, in January, my topic also involved the idea of doubt. When Philip tells Nathanael “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” In today’s reading, Thomas really couldn’t just “Come and see.”, since Jesus didn’t appear on demand, but he would have liked to have seen what the others had seen.

Although I could have explored the connection between the approaching deadline for income tax filing and the reading from Acts about giving EVERYTHING one has for the common good, I thought that would be altogether too depressing, especially since we just had our taxes prepared last Thursday. So, instead, I thought I would talk a some more about doubt.

It’s a real eye-opener to do an Internet search on religious doubt. The number of entries is huge. These entries begin with attempts to prove the existence of God and go on from there. I remember a Philosophy of Religion class that I took in college. We, too, began with the classical philosophers trying to find a way to prove that God existed. I especially remember Rene Descartes saying that if he knew that he existed, he could go on from there. But how does he know that he really exists? His solution was the famous ‘I think, therefore, I am.’ Then, there was Blaise Pascal’s wager when it came to believing in God. Even if one could not actually prove the existence of God by reason there is much to be gained from wagering that God exists and living accordingly. There is little or nothing to be gained from wagering and acting as if God doesn’t exist. Fifty five years ago in undergrad school, all that was overwhelming and not something I want to burden anyone with now. Therefore, I will leave the larger topic of doubt to someone

else and I will further restrict my focus to an apology for Thomas, who has not been treated fairly, in my opinion.

From our reading, today, it appears that Thomas did not doubt the existence of God or even the divinity of Christ. When Thomas recites what it would take to prove to him that Christ was raised from the dead, i.e. touching the nail holes in his hands and placing his hand in the Savior's side, this is what the others had already seen when Christ appeared in the locked room. Thomas wasn't asking for more proof than the others already had.

It looks to me as if he was unsure about the actual mechanics of the resurrection. And, who can blame him? Had all the Apostles been warned about what was to come? Yes, but Jesus was not known for speaking in a totally straightforward way. Notice, for example, Matthew 13 and the collection of "The Kingdom of God" parables where Jesus says, 'The Kingdom of God is like' and then tells a story to illustrate, like the farmer sowing seeds or the farmer's enemy over sowing bad seeds or the mustard seed or the hidden treasure. Face it, the followers of Jesus were simple people, laborers, carpenters and fishermen. Not many were like Paul with education in more abstract areas.

We know that the disciples struggled with these parables and had to have them explained to them. Yes, Jesus had said repeatedly what was going to happen to him and that he would be going up to heaven, but we also know that Old Testament figures were taken up to heaven in different ways. In 2nd Kings, Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire, Enoch, on the other hand, walked with God and was taken up by Him in Genesis 5 and in Hebrews 11. I guess that, potentially, even the ladder that Jacob saw at Beth-el could have been a means of entering heaven. So when Thomas missed Christ's first appearance in the upper room and was told what the others had seen, I could see myself thinking in the same way. His previous and fairly recent experience with resurrection was with Lazarus. Lazarus was brought back to life but, then he stayed

around. I know that Christ told the disciples that he was going on to his father's house, but I can see Thomas expecting that the resurrection of Jesus would at least resemble that of Lazarus in some way. Also, let's not forget that this is Thomas's only recorded episode of doubt. Previously, as told in John 11:8,16, it is Thomas who encourages the disciples to go with Christ to Lazarus in Bethany, where people wanted to kill Jesus. Thomas says, "Let us also go that we may die with him". There doesn't seem to be any doubt in that statement. So, it really seems unfair that for one moment of what I see as confusion ends up adding the nickname 'Doubting' to Thomas. We don't talk about 'Denying Peter' even though Peter denied Christ 3 separate times, not just once.

The first time I remember encountering religious doubt was not mine, but my mother's. In talking about some aspect of the service she dismissed it, saying, "I don't believe all that crap." That was the first time my mother had ever said anything like that to me. (My dad, on the other hand was a refugee from the RCA, and they had manage to crush any affection for organized religion he might have had. Sadly, my dad doubted it all.) My mother's announcement struck me as strange also because I had never thought of an "*ala carte*" approach to religion, where you got Jesus and two sides of your choice. It also left me wondering, if she didn't believe all that crap, was there some "crap" in which she did believe? I never explored that aspect of her belief with her. It seemed best to leave it alone. She was happy with her beliefs as they were and very faithful in her worship. But, it always stuck with me.

According to my wife, I over think everything. If you ask me what condiments I want on my hamburger, I have to read the last 3 years of Consumers' Reports and do 2 Internet searches before I can answer. I am very skeptical of almost everything but when it comes to my religious beliefs, at least at this point in my life, I am not aware of doubting. Pascal, of Pascal's wager that I mentioned earlier, says this: "We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them." My wife puts it more simply: in all things, including faith, always go with your instinct, your

gut. In conclusion, I do have to say that John 20, today's gospel reading, does provide us with one of my favorite definitions of faith, however. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." When it comes to certainty, it is said that seeing is believing, but it appears that, in reality, TRUE believing is NOT seeing.

Evans