

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for April 19, 2020 ~ Easter 2A

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In one of E.M. Forster's novels, he offers us an imaginative interpretation of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. He lets us see in vivid ways how the music sets forth the idea in the beginning that dark, evil goblins are walking across the face of the earth. Then, with great gusts of beautiful music, they are swept away. The earth seems to be made clean and fresh and new again, but in just a few moments, the goblins return, this time to assert their power. They almost seem to take over the whole world and then are driven out again. The glorious music pushes them back and away and the symphony closes on a great, high, joyous note. The goblins have been completely swept out of the world. But we all know the goblins have been here and we know they will be back again.

That's a pretty good description of the situation we find ourselves in with this COVID-19 pandemic. It's also a good description of the dynamic relationship between faith and doubt in our lives, isn't it? Crises like this have a way of undermining our ability to trust and increasing our inclination to doubt. No matter how strong our faith becomes there are those times when doubts seem stronger. Some force confronts our faith and stamps the inscription "Insufficient Evidence" across its face. Then, we're faced with a choice; either to accept the indictment or to search for that which will eradicate it and restore faith to its shining brilliance. Knowing this troublesome, sometimes debilitating experience, we can identify with the Apostle Thomas in his skepticism during that first Easter Week.

He was not with the others when the risen Lord first appeared to them. He insisted that their report was just too good to be true. Resurrections just weren't that common. He'd seen the man die. There would have to be more evidence than the report of a few seemingly emotional people for Thomas' faith to be restored. He would have to see him personally and touch the wounds in order to believe this good news.

We can learn from Thomas as we identify with his struggle between faith and doubt.

To begin with we see that Jesus appearance to Thomas was not just a wish fulfilled.

The element of doubt was there from the beginning. In Luke's gospel, we are told that when the women told the disciples about the empty tomb, they thought it was nonsense. Even after Peter went and looked, he was amazed. Mark says that Jesus scolded the disciples for their stubborn refusal to believe the reports of those who had seen him. Matthew, likewise, reports that some of the disciples doubted even when they saw him. So, even though Thomas has received most of the attention through the generations, he was certainly not alone in his doubts about the Risen Christ.

We have put him down because of his desire for a solid foundation under his faith. The element of doubt plays a crucial and perhaps necessary role in the resurrection message. It sets the stage and shows us that even though the disciples had heard Jesus talk about rising in three days, they had not understood. Resurrection was the last thing they expected. They didn't even understand well enough to know to wish for it.

The good news is that God has acted on behalf of humanity, in spite of humanity's failure to know what to expect or inability to know what to ask for. God often breaks into our lives when we least expect it imparting to us divine peace and power or commissioning us to go and be emissaries in the world. Christ Jesus is not intimidated by doubt and will not ultimately let doubt stand in the way of God's work in the

lives of people. The Risen One has appeared in the most unlikely places, in an atmosphere of doubt, and established beyond doubt his identity as the Lord of Life.

In today's Gospel reading, we have the resurrection story as experienced by Thomas, a practical-minded man who demanded evidence as a foundation for his faith. His slowness and reluctance to believe may strengthen our own faith, for here it appears that the witnesses of Christ's resurrection were not easy, credulous people, but cautious enough to suspend their belief of it until they saw the supreme evidence. Jesus' appearance to Thomas was more than a wish fulfilled. It was a surprise encounter between the Living Lord and a person who would be satisfied only with solid evidence.

We also recognize in this incident that seeing is not necessarily a guarantee of believing.

Have you ever demanded that God provide some sign, some proof, some clear evidence of his existence or his will for your life? I certainly have. So have countless souls yearning for God to be real to them. We naively expect that if we see will automatically believe.

This was a common problem in the early Church – the relationship between seeing and believing. How can people be expected to believe in a God they cannot see? A graven image or idol seems so much more tangible and real.

Yet we recognize the folly of our question when we remember what John says at the beginning of his gospel regarding Jesus: "The Word was in the world and though God made the world through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own country but his own people did not receive him." The incarnation was God's attempt to wrap the greatest idea ever in a person whom people could hear, touch, recognize, and believe. The cross is dramatic evidence that seeing is no guarantee of believing.

Believing in the reality and faithfulness of the Risen Christ is more than seeing. What appears on the surface to be insufficient evidence is revealed to the one who honestly struggles with doubt and faith as the ultimate reality of life.

Then, in this incident with Thomas, we are reminded that even the most empirical evidence is incomplete without the evidence from personal experience.

What are the five senses without experience? A scientist must rely on his or her own experience of the evidences that are seen, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled in conducting an experiment. How is the experience of the presence, the love, and the power of the living Christ in a person's life any less real? No experiment is complete or valid, no philosophical argument is authentic, apart from the existential fact of human experience.

One of my professors in seminary used to say, "One can neither confirm nor deny in the armchair what has been established in the laboratory of the human soul." If you have experienced the living reality of God in your life, there's not a person alive who can stand outside of you and destroy the evidence. It's real! It's true! It's indispensable in the realm of vital Christianity. Without it, faith cannot survive and the doubts which live on the edge of our lives will consume us.

Who among us wants to glorify doubt? Though it may be necessary in the process of coming to faith, it is certainly not our ultimate goal. Would you rather be eulogized as a person of great and dauntless doubt

than as a person of strong and genuine faith? Doubt is glorious only in its relation to faith. Questions should lead to answers.

I'm glad to be in a Church that recognizes the role of doubt in the quest for truth. We affirm along with Tennyson, "There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds." Doubt, honest doubt, is the forbearer of discovery! A questing spirit is normal and necessary in the development of a growing person. There is a proper place for doubt, both in individual and corporate experience. Thomas expressed his doubts in the security of the community of those whom Jesus had called along with him. He could have chosen his friends from among the Pharisees whom everyone admired, from the local carpenters union to which he belonged, or from the crowd that mingled for their daily gossip sessions in the village square. Instead, he chose to remain among the friends of Jesus.

Never did one of them say, "Thomas, you're through here. Out you go. You can't stay in our midst because you are a heretic, a skeptic, and an unbeliever." The disciples loved him not because of his doubt but because of his struggle to believe. He achieved it in company with them.

I wrote about how our Church works with doubt in my reflection last week. One of my friends responded by saying this, "Here's the deal about being an Episcopalian. You get to tinker with what you're taught until you get a personal encompassing belief that you're comfortable with. Meanwhile, your church doesn't scream at you that what you've just done is the work of the devil. Consequently, you love being an Episcopalian and can't imagine being anything else. I'm one of those" (Bill Cherry).

If you have doubts about the Resurrection, about your relationship with God, about life everlasting, take heart! You are not the first and you will not be the last. You've come to the right Church. Here in the company of others who have been led from doubt to faith and have had confirmed in their experience that the evidence is more than adequate to put strong wings on weary lives. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.