

Second Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
19 April 2020

John 20:19-31

One of my favorite parts of Easter is when the children and family finally go home to their jobs, colleges, and boarding schools, and I can have the house all for myself. Usually, the Monday after Easter, my wife and I go on vacation for a few days to recharge the batteries and re-connect with each other, after weeks of serving others at church and home. This Easter, however, has been problematic for me. For starters, the children are still here, eating my food, drinking my beer, demanding that I cook for them and clean after them. And, what makes it worse is that I think they are planning to stay for several more months! This is too much! I worked so hard to get rid of them, and now they are back! Darn you, Corona Virus! Darn you! I hope you know me enough by now to know that I am kidding. I love having the kids at home, I love the 500-dollar grocery-bills, and I love the mountains of laundry we are producing!

Anyway, enough complaining. Let me tell you a silly joke. A defense attorney, knowing the evidence against his client was solid and he would most likely lose his case, told the jury in his closing remarks. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, I promise you that within the next two minutes, the person my client is accused of killing will walk through those doors." After this statement, the courtroom directed their attention to the front doors for two minutes. When nothing happened, the lawyer said, "Since all of you held your attention, waiting for the supposed victim to walk in, this leads me to believe that there is reasonable doubt about his death, and you must return a verdict of not guilty." Two hours later the jury walked back into courtroom and read a finding of "Guilty." The lawyer asked the foreman, "I saw you all look at the door. Certainly you are not sure this person is dead!" The foreman replied, "We all looked at the door, but your client didn't!"

I told you it was a silly joke! That my friends was truth in advertising. The story of Thomas is one of the most remembered stories in the Gospel. Let us review the passage: For some reason Thomas is not with the disciples when Jesus appears in their midst. The Disciples continue to tell him about the encounter, but he continues to say, "Unless I see... I will not believe." Of course, we know what happens the following Sunday when Thomas is with them and Jesus appears in their midst. Thomas makes an incredible move from doubting to affirming Christ's divinity in an astonishing statement not seen anywhere else in the Gospels. Thomas says, "My Lord and my God." This is the first time Jesus is called "God" without any qualifying statement, without any explanation, simply "God." This is the ultimate affirmation of who Jesus of Nazareth is. The most compact and theologically significant statement about Christ in the entire Bible, and it came not from the lips of Peter, Mary, or even the "beloved Disciple," but it came through the lips of a man we call "Doubting Thomas."

Since the Enlightenment Thomas has become an important figure in the life of the Church. With the advent of the scientific era there has been great value in questioning, testing, touching, seeing, trying for yourself, doubting, etc. Our scientific age has valued inquiry and discernment more than any age before. Suddenly, we all have become Thomas, and, Thomas has become the right thing to be. We are now encouraged to test for ourselves, not just accept the wild testimony of others, but to test and see if what is true for others might be true for us as well.

Is this inquiring faith appropriate? I believe it is. There are at least four stages of our faith development, and questioning and discerning is one of these stages. Faith begins as a practical matter. We inherit our faith as little children, when we begin to come to church and memorize prayers without knowing exactly what they mean. This is a practical faith that tells children, “This is what we do as a family.”

As the child grows, we begin to fill in the great narratives of our Biblical faith, and through Sunday School, Children’s Chapel, and Vacation Bible School we begin to teach our children about the great themes of our faith, from Adam and Eve to Jesus and beyond. This stage may be called, “This is what we believe as Christians.” Some call this the “Doctrine Stage,” when children begin to be exposed to credal Christianity.

At some point in our development, usually as teenagers, we begin to ask important questions about God, Church, Holy Scripture, etc. We begin to ask, “Is this what I believe in?” “Do I believe what I have learned and practiced? Should I test it for myself? Should I see with my own eyes?” This is the Thomas stage. He is no longer content with the testimony of others, he has to see for himself. Many Christians choose to leave the church at this stage. This is the wondering stage, when we try to decide whether we believe now what we used to believe as children.

The last stage is that of personal faith. At some point, the person has a personal encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, and now he or she is able to say, “This is what I believe!” Jesus is my God and my Lord. This is the mature faith to which Thomas and the other Disciples arrived. This is the type of faith you would give up your life for. This faith transforms lives, homes, and communities.

After talking about Thomas for awhile, however, I want to suggest that this passage is not so much about Thomas coming to believe in Jesus, as much as it is a commissioning service for the Disciples. Jesus sends them out into the world, as he himself was sent by his Father into the world. This is what Jesus says when he appears to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” After this, Jesus proceeds to give his Holy Spirit to his disciples. He breathes on them in the same way that God sent his creative Spirit over the chaos that covered the face of the earth at the beginning of creation. He breathes his spirit on them in the same way Ezekiel is asked to call on the winds of the east and west to bring dried bones back to life (Ezekiel 37). He breathes on them and turns them into the most powerful evangelistic force the world has ever seen. Today, Jesus commissions his disciples for ministry.

“Easter is not just participating in a wonderful, inspiring worship service. It is commissioning service. God sends us back into the (hostile) world, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to bear witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus” (Sermon Illustrations.com.) In a very real sense, everything that we celebrated last week was done so that we might come to believe that Christ is God for us and with us, and, so that we might become equipped to preach this truth to the ends of the world. It is for the sake of the world out there that we gather in here. I pray that we too may come to the mature faith to which Thomas came. I pray that filled with the Holy Spirit we too might say, “My Lord and my God.” And I pray that we accept God’s commission and go into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, and proclaiming to all that Jesus Christ is truly the Savior of the World. Amen!