

“Doubtless” Easter 2 a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, Presbyterian Church USA April 19, 2009

TEXT: John 20:19-29 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

We love Thomas. Old Thomas. Old seeing-is-believing, doubting Thomas, the original Missourian-- the “show me” kid! There is hardly a person here who hasn’t said to me, “O my, I love Thomas. He is me!”

Now here he is again, like clockwork, showing up the week after Easter. Every year at this time, Thomas appears in a thousand churches as we all settle into the reality of a Risen Christ and wonder, could it be true? I don’t know about you, but years of finger pointing -- “don’t be a doubting Thomas” – have made me doubt my doubts – and yet – and yet – who among us has not at one point wondered, how can I believe this? What does it mean?

In some ways, Thomas gets a bad rap here. He is really quite a passionate disciple. He could just as well have ended up being called Courageous Thomas. After all, when a message came to Jesus that Lazarus was sick unto death, the disciples tried to persuade him not to venture near Jerusalem: “Rabbi, the authorities were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” But Thomas, with piercing resignation, says “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

He could also have been dubbed Seeking Thomas. It was during Jesus final discourse that he waxes poetic about eternal hope in the mansions prepared by him. Carried away by metaphor upon beautiful metaphor, he ended. “And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Incisive Thomas interrupts. “Hey, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” The discourse rapidly changes, as Jesus replies frankly “I am the way.”

And it is surprising that Thomas is not remembered as Confessing Thomas, for it is he who delivers the punch line that sets off 2000 years of systematic Christology: “My Lord and my God.” There is no clearer or purer response in faith than that one passionate line.

Alas, instead he will always be Doubting Thomas! That, of course, is why we like him. Remember a few years ago when we were both horrified and reassured that the journals of Mother Teresa expressed excruciating doubts about her faith? There is comfort in knowing that at least one disciple was able to question. Thomas becomes us in that he wants more than a secondhand report. He wants his own experience.

You see, Thomas missed it. He was not there for the sudden appearance of the risen Christ, entered through the locked doors. He did not hear the compelling and repeated assurance “Peace be with you,” he did not get blasted by that astonishing and enlivening breath of Spirit. He did not hear the commission, “Stop hiding; Go out, do my work, forgive and be forgiven. Invite people into new life.”

Who knows why Thomas had left. Maybe he went out to pick up the mail. Maybe he wanted to see if their pictures were already up in the post office. Somebody had to buy groceries, and set the trash out at the curb. Perhaps he went to check on Mary the mother of Jesus, who was supposed to be with John. When he got back, perhaps with a secret knock, he found his friends babbling that Jesus had been there, had spoken to them, shown his wounds to them. Do you suppose he thought, sure, Mr. Simon let-us-build-three-booths Peter. You’ve seen our Rabbi. Mr. Simon -. You-shall-never-wash-my-feet, not-my-feet-only-but also my hands-and -my-head Peter. Sure you’ve seen a risen Christ, Mr. Simon I’ll-never-deny-thee-deny-thee-three-times Peter.

This isn’t a matter of cynicism. Thomas isn’t scoffing -- he is agonizing. More than anyone else on this day, Thomas would love to link the Risen Christ with the Crucified One. He is aching to believe. Thomas didn’t doubt that his friends saw someone, something...but he feared it might have been a phantom, an apparition, a hallucination. He feared it could not, would not be true.

So Thomas stands in for all of us as he gets his proof. His doubt ends up leading to his faith. He declares his hunger for physical proof of the resurrection. And Jesus appears to give Thomas what he needed – just as Jesus gives us what we need, if we but ask.

The problem is not our doubts. Paul Tillich says that doubt is a necessary part of faith, a necessary tension. The trouble comes in not moving through doubt to be open to faith. Faith, deep faith, says, Thomas Merton says it is not the suppression of doubt it is the overcoming of doubt, the struggling doubt. It is the seeking and opening and receiving. Doubt is a place to pass through, not to set up housekeeping. Poet Maria Rilke urges if we keep asking the questions, we will live into the answers.

Our Gospel reading is not about doubt, not even primarily about Thomas. It is about the risen Jesus and his willingness to accept us right where we are, to come to us in any way

we need, to offer us the transforming power of the Easter and the guaranteed presence of Christ. The focus is not on the doubt, or the fear and despair and confusion. It is on the amazing power of Jesus to overcome our barriers to belief, to come through our locked doors, and to continue the mission that he began during his earthly visit.

The root of the Latin word for belief, *credo*, is the word for heart, *cor*. Belief is more than what is happening in our mind. A person who believes gives one's whole self to something - as we see Thomas do when he encounters the risen Christ! Wendy Wright has written: "To believe something (in a religious sense) is not simply to hold an opinion; it is to let that something sink down into the marrow of your bones and form the structure of your life. To believe something is to let its affirmation become the inhalation and exhalation of your life's breath. Belief does not exclude doubt or incredulity or intellectual curiosity, but belief is not exhausted in doubting or incredulity or curiosity. To believe something is to let it transform your life."

We haven't learned all that quickly from Thomas. Every day we believe in things that we can see or prove, concrete things we can count on. But all of a sudden, that insurance policy can't protect us, and that stock portfolio no longer provides for us. We trust in the advertised products that make us look younger but we still age. We believe in the power of hard work but we lose our jobs. We put friends and family over meditation or prayer or church time, and we forget to ask for the presence and power of our risen Christ. We forget to let our doubts inform us and propel us, instead of derail us.

There's an old New Yorker magazine cartoon that shows a large door, locked three times with heavy bolts, reinforced by sturdy chains. And just to make sure that nothing could invade the formidable fortress, a long bar was securely fastened across the door frame. And yet, upon close examination of the picture, it was clear that someone had managed to slip a Valentine under the door. God is trying to slip a Valentine under our door of disbelief. More than that, God is earnestly calling us to unbolt the door of our hearts and let God come in. God's Son is patiently knocking, but the latch is on the inside where we control it. Will we let God in?

My daughter once came home from school some years ago with the remarkable declaration, "Do you know we could do brain surgery and investigate the parts of your brain and we could do a CAT scan and see the brain patterns in your head. But we couldn't prove that you've had a single thought today."

Some things don't need empirical proof. Some things you just live into.

Martin Luther wrote "Faith does not require information, knowledge and certainty but a free surrender and a joyful bet on God's unfelt, untried, and unknown goodness." May we believe in the One who came not just under the door, but through the door of our own hearts. And may that enable us to rejoice with the prisoner who scribbled this poem on the barrack walls of a Warsaw concentration camp: "I believe in the sun even when it doesn't shine. I believe in love even if I do not feel it. I believe in God, even if I do not see God." May it be so. AMEN