**April 12, 2015 – 2nd Sunday in Easter**

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I sometimes wish I could pick the brains of the people on the Revised Common Lectionary committee to find out why they did certain things. I’m sure they had good reasons, or at least what they thought were good reasons.

Today’s Gospel story of Doubting Thomas is read every year on the second Sunday in Easter, so it must have some significance. Which is for us to figure out, I guess, not having access to those committee members, or to John the Gospel writer, either.

There are a lot of interesting things about this passage to take note of. First of all, it’s unique to the Gospel of John, which isn’t that surprising since, a) a lot of things are unique to John, and b) ALL of the Gospel post-resurrection stories are completely different from one another. Second, this story isn’t really about doubt. It’s about belief, and coming to belief in different ways.

John makes a point of telling us that the doors to the house where the disciples were meeting were closed up tight because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. They were terrified and hiding out, not knowing what to do next. But then, in spite of the locked doors, Jesus came and stood among them saying, “Peace be with you.” Then he showed them his wounds without their having to ask, and they rejoiced. They believed.

Then along comes Thomas, who had been out getting a paper or something when Jesus first appeared. As soon as he comes in, the other disciples pounce on him and say, “We have seen the Lord!” Which, if you remember, is exactly what Mary Magdalene said to them all when SHE came back from encountering the risen Christ and I’m pretty sure that’s no coincidence.

Well, Thomas only wants what the other disciples got – proof positive that it’s Jesus, and not some imposter. The others got to see Jesus’ wounds and were convinced, so he had to, too. And he did, and he was, and took his belief one step further by declaring Jesus to be his Lord and his God.

Now, there’s a perfectly good verb in Greek that means “to believe,” which is *pisteuo*. And there’s a perfectly good verb in Greek that means “to doubt,” which is *distadzo*. So imagine my surprise when I discovered that John didn’t use those perfectly good verbs in the sentence translated as “Do not doubt, but believe.”

Instead, he used the adjectives *pistos* and *apistos*, believing and unbelieving, which do derive from *pisteuo*, but don’t have the active component that the verb does. And the verb he uses is g*inomai,* meaning to come into being, to become, or to be born. So instead of “Do not doubt, but believe,” it becomes “Do not be reborn as an unbelieving person, but rather be reborn as a believing person.

The reason I’m taking you on this journey through Grammarland is not because I’m a Greek geek and think it’s cool – well not ENTIRELY because of that – but because John was very precise in his choice of words and they matter. Jesus tells Thomas to change his entire being into one who believes, to center his life around believing. It’s like the difference between someone saying, “You are trustworthy,” and “I trust you with my life.”

And Thomas rises to the challenge as, presumably, the other disciples also did the week before.

So what does this look like, this life transformation? And how does it manifest itself in our community of faith? I want to turn our attention to the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles for an answer to that. Here it is again:

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

This depiction of the community of early disciples has been called “Christian Communism,” sometimes derisively and sometimes admiringly. I’m not sure it was that, but it certainly paints an idealized picture of the early Church. As such, it may be meant to be more of an illustration than an historic depiction of what it was really like in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension, but we don’t know that. All we have is this description.

“*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul…”* This little group of Jesus’ followers had, as John says, centered their lives, their hearts and souls, around believing. It doesn’t say they were of one mind, like some kind of hive mentality. But they were all united in their shared belief in the risen Christ as the Son of God, and that trumped everything – even personal possessions.

*“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”* So together in this new community, they became suddenly fearless about proclaiming the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit gave them the power and grace to continue doing that in spite of any hardships they might face.

And finally, “*There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.”* The members of this community didn’t live to get ahead in the world, or to own more stuff, or even to be comfortably well off. They lived to proclaim the Gospel. And those of lesser means didn’t have to worry about putting making a living or providing for their families over following Jesus. They were provided for with no questions asked.

It sounds ideal, doesn’t it? And also pretty ridiculous! Christian communism? How could that possibly even work today? The couple of experiments in communism in the 20th century turned out to be hopeless busts, as those in power took what they wanted and forced everyone else to comply with how they wanted things to go, thus becoming just like any other totalitarian regime, only with uglier clothes. And we in this country were so threatened by the very thought that we fought with propaganda and awful warfare to eradicate it anywhere it popped up – even on our own soil.

And yet, this is what’s being proposed as the ideal community setting for Jesus’ followers to live and work in. It’s being proposed for US to live and work in. But, clearly, this ideal didn’t last long even in Jerusalem. Paul, in some of his letters, begs for money to bring back to Jerusalem because they were so poor there. And some of the communities that Paul is working with are a far cry from the ideal presented in Acts.

So I am not proposing that we all sell all we have and pool our cash, and then dole it out as people need it, as nice as that sounds to perhaps some of us. But here’s where the story of Thomas comes back into play, and in this there’s something we CAN aspire to.

Jesus tells Thomas to be reborn into a believing person – not to merely believe, but to transform his whole being into a believer. Thomas, as one of the Twelve, had obviously been a devoted follower before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. But Jesus said, “Right here, right now, Thomas, turn your life over to God.”

This is something we all can do. It doesn’t take a special ceremony, or a rebaptism or anything like that. It just takes intention. It takes wanting to become one of the group of believers who are of one heart and soul, with that heart and soul belonging to Jesus. It takes transformation.

And we have one of the means of transformation right here at our disposal, every Sunday, and more often if we’d like to. I would like to draw your attention to the big table in the middle of the sanctuary. It’s not hard to do, since the entire church was designed to do just that.

Our Evangelical brothers and sisters have a practice in many of their gatherings called an altar call, where the pastor appeals to the congregation to come forward and ask for prayers or renew their commitment to Christ.

It can be very moving, but to many of us Episcopalians, it’s pretty foreign to our experience unless we’re visiting another church or attending a Gospel concert. But in a very real way, we have our own altar call every Sunday. It’s the Holy Eucharist.

And just like the Evangelical altar calls are experiences of renewal and healing, so can ours be. In fact, it SHOULD be. The Eucharist SHOULD be transformational and should rejuvenate our faith week after week. Sharing communion together, with Jesus right there in the midst of us, gives us our common life and our common commitment to God.

This is the kind of community that will go out into the world with grace and power and change it. This is the kind of community that cares less for investments and buildings and even traditions and more for people in need and doing God’s work in the world.

And this is the kind of community that Grace Church can be. Starting right now. It’s our choice. Come to this table today ready to let the Holy Spirit in, and be transformed.

Amen.