**April 27, 2014 – Second Sunday of Easter**

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Who hasn’t been called, or heard of someone being called, a Doubting Thomas. Usually this isn’t a very nice thing. It implies an inability to see what’s right in front of your face, and an attitude of obstructionism. It carries a sense of someone who is outside of the group, and who maybe thinks they’re smarter than everyone else.

I think poor Thomas gets a bad rap. Let’s set the scene before Thomas even comes into the picture. The disciples have holed up in that upper room, “for fear of the Jews,” the Gospel says.

Before we get back to the story, I think we need to take a minute to examine that a bit because the Gospel of John has often been mislabeled anti-Semitic, and for about two thousand years has been used as a weapon against the Jewish people. In fact, it wasn’t until 1965 that the Roman Catholic church put out a document repudiating that idea.

When John says “Jews,” he’s not talking about all Jewish people. With John, it’s usually shorthand for the Jewish authorities – the Pharisees and the Scribes, or Jewish lawyers. The disciples were all Jews, of course, as was Jesus. And remember, so was the community of Christ believers that John was writing for. But John’s community had just been expelled from the synagogues for their belief that Jesus was the Messiah, so there was an intra-Jewish fight going on that’s reflected in John’s Gospel.

So when John writes that the disciples were locked in the house for fear of the Jews, it’s a double meaning – fear on the part of the disciples for the danger they would have been in as followers of Jesus, and fear on the part of the Johannine community for the trouble they were experiencing in their own lives, also for being followers of Jesus.

But let’s stick with the disciples for now. There they are, huddled together in fear and mourning. Peter and another disciple, maybe John, come back from the tomb to tell them that Jesus’ body had disappeared. Then Mary comes running in to tell them that Jesus was alive and she had seen him and talked to him!

I think to say that confusion reigned might be an understatement. Then, at the height of all this turmoil, Jesus himself appears through the locked door, says, “Peace be with you,” and breathes the Holy Spirit into them. What a day! It makes our own Easter celebrations look a little tame!

But Thomas wasn’t there for that first appearance in the upper room. The text doesn’t say why. Maybe he was out shopping, or trying to find out if the danger had passed, or maybe he just hadn’t caught up with them yet. When he finally does catch up with the disciples, they were no doubt crazy excited and falling all over themselves to tell him that they had seen Jesus in the flesh. John doesn’t record Thomas’ emotions, just his flat statement of essentially, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

I was trying to think of how Thomas might have felt at that moment, and the closest analogy I could think of was a celebrity sighting. When I lived in New York, where many celebrities live, I never seemed to be in the right place and time to see any of them, though I heard a lot of stories from my classmates. “I saw Katie Holmes in the cupcake shop,” one would say. Or “My dog’s leash got caught in Ethan Hawke’s dog’s leash today,” from someone else.

Imagine you care about these things and you’re invited to a party where your favorite celebrity is going to make an appearance. You get to the party a bit late, only to find that your celebrity has been and gone. But your best friends were there and met the celebrity, and fall all over themselves to tell you how NICE he or she was, and relate every conversation they had with them. You would feel a little left out, I think.

Obviously, I’m not trying to make a deep theological statement about celebrities or parties here, but maybe feeling like he had missed out on something could be one reason Thomas responded the way he did. Or maybe he was just an empiricist and couldn’t believe this fantastic story until he’d experienced it himself. Or maybe he couldn’t let himself believe that it could be true because it would hurt too much.

One of the amazing things about this story is not Thomas’ doubts, but Jesus’ response when he returns and Thomas is there. Thomas doesn’t even get a chance to demand proof that Jesus is there in the flesh because Jesus provides it without being asked. And although all of the artwork I’ve ever seen depicting this topic shows Thomas putting his hand in the wound in Jesus’ side, the text doesn’t actually say he did. Without needing to test the proof that Jesus so willingly offered, Thomas immediately makes one of the strongest personal declaration of faith in the entire New Testament when he calls Jesus “My Lord and my God!”

So really, this is more a story of faith than of doubt. Jesus doesn’t chide Thomas for his unbelief. He doesn’t tell him, “Get behind me, Satan,” like he did with Peter. For that matter, he doesn’t take any of the disciples to task for being afraid and hiding. His words to them are words of peace and encouragement. For Jesus, faith is about being in relationship, not about our being able to demonstrate how faithful we are to him. And his own unwavering faithfulness is his gift to his disciples and to us, just as God’s enduring faithfulness was his gift to the Israelites.

Thomas and the rest of the disciples, and for that matter, WE wouldn’t be human if each of us didn’t have doubts. But faith is a choice we make in spite of those doubts. I think sometimes that the joyful seasons of Easter and Christmas don’t leave much, if any, room for doubt or fear. We’re done being penitential and sad, right? In the immortal words of Billy Bass, “Don’t worry, be happy!” But by the same token, paradoxically, they don’t leave much room for faith.

I’m sure you’ve heard me quote more than once that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Faith and doubt are companions, just like courage and fear. Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather acting in spite of fear. And faith is not the absence of doubt, but acting in spite of doubt. Thomas and the disciples had it kind of easy – they had the real live physical Jesus in the room with them. But Jesus had a special blessing for those who, going forward, wouldn’t have the physical proof of his presence and who would still come to believe.

He’s talking about US here. We don’t have Jesus with us in human, physical form any more. But like the disciples, we do have the gift of the Holy Spirit, as we will celebrate at the end of these fifty days of Easter. And we have the real presence of Jesus nearly every week as we break bread and share wine together. And we have each other – the body of Christ – to rely on in our doubts and fears.

Mother Margaret Watson, from the Cheyenne River Mission writes every day in a blog called *Leave it Lay Where Jesus Flang It*, which is very much worth reading if you ever get the chance. Recently, she wrote really eloquently about faith: “…it's Christ's faith we share and carry, not our own. Our own "personal" or "individual" faith leads us down the roads of The Denial of Peter and The Betrayal of Judas. There is nothing personal nor individual about Christian faith. "Personal" faith denies that we are members of a Body -- not individually members of it, not complete in ourselves complimenting the whole -- but, incomplete in ourselves, participating in the whole.

So doubt away. But don’t let those doubts cripple you into thinking you’ve lost your faith. Share them with someone, and share them with God. Because faith is action, not feeling, and faith is relationship, not solitude. Reach out to each other, and to God, and, like Thomas, those doubts will turn to the joyful exclamation of “My Lord and my God!”

I want to close with another quotation, this time from retired Bishop Steven Charleston, which I think speaks to how important we are to each other:

“We are reminders to one another, reminders that there is something gracious in life, something sincere and honest. Even by our presence in this brief encounter of shared faith we let one another know that belief in goodness and mercy has not become absent from our lives, but rather that it is growing, passing between us and between all of the others we meet here, spreading out through our lives, warming the cold world with love.”

Amen.