April 7, 2013 – Second Sunday of Easter

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Because many of my Facebook friends are church geeks, a lot of posts have been about today's Gospel. One of the funniest is a cartoon that shows Thomas saying, "All I'm saying is that if we don't call Peter 'Denying Peter' or Mark 'Ran Away Naked Mark,' why should I be saddled with this title?" To which the cartoon Jesus replies, "I see you point, Thomas, but really it's time to move on."

Poor Thomas has gotten a bad rap over the years, I think. We've labeled him because of this story, but really, there's plenty of doubt in the Gospels to go around. In both Mark and Luke, the women take the tale of the empty tomb back to the eleven disciples and are not believed. In Matthew, the women are believed and Jesus' instructions to go to Galilee are followed, but after they get there Matthew tells us that they worshiped Jesus, but some doubted.

And in today's story, the text specifically says that Jesus shows the ten disciples his hands and his side and THEN the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. It could be that everyone doubted until they saw the wounds, so it's not surprising that Thomas, who had run out to the store or something that day, should also demand proof.

Our world today is full of doubters, full of people who demand proof of who we are. If you want to vote or fly somewhere, you'd better have a valid picture ID on you. If you want a drink in a bar and look pretty young, you'd better have proof of your birth date. Or so I've heard – it hasn't happened to me in a VERY long time. To get a student or senior citizen discount you need a card; to get money out of the bank you need a pin number; to buy something online you need the cvs code on your credit card, and on and on and on.

And yet, we don't think these are evidence of lack of trust necessarily. They're usually precautions for our own protection. So why are we so surprised when a group of people who saw their friend die should be cautious when he appears in their apartment through a locked door. John mentions that locked door twice, so he wants us to notice it.

And yet poor Thomas is held up as the epitome of doubt, as if doubt were something bad. But doubt isn't necessarily a bad thing. While I was doing research for this sermon, I found a couple of interesting quotes on doubt. One was hard to find a source for, though some attribute it to Anne Lamott. It's, "The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty." The other one is credited to the 20th century theologian Paul Tillich, who said, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

Both of these quotes reinforce the fact that doubt, in certain circumstances, may not be a bad thing in our life of faith. Without doubt, we wouldn't bother to think critically or to examine a strongly held premise. Doubt gives us discernment – without it, we might not be able to change our mind in the light of new information, or, conversely, we might not question any new theory or fad that comes along. Without doubt we might not be able to change injustices we see happening around us.

If we put ourselves in those disciples shoes, even Thomas', it's not hard to imagine why they might be concerned, even skeptical. However, all of the attention on doubt in this passage tends to obscure a couple of other details that I think are really important to pay attention to.

First, before any of their doubts and fears were allayed, Jesus spoke to them. They heard his voice. Just like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, they weren't totally convinced until they heard his voice. The text says that Jesus invited Thomas to put his hands in his wounds, but it doesn't say that Thomas did that, in spite of what he had said to the disciples a week before. But he also spoke directly to Thomas, as he had with the other disciples, and Thomas knew who he was.

Remember how the Gospel of John starts. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word, the Logos, is the essence of who Jesus is, and his disciples, including Mary and John, became fully aware of that upon hearing him speak.

Second, Jesus breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit from him. This is John's version of the Pentecost event. Luke's version is much more detailed, but no less powerful than this one. There they were, locked away in fear in that upper room, too afraid and grief stricken to go out. When Jesus appears to them, the first thing he says is, "Peace be with you." Then he delivers on the promise that he had made to them earlier in John's Gospel, that he would send the Holy Spirit to them to help them.

Jesus didn't wait until his disciples were perfect in their faith, whatever that might mean, to breathe the Holy Spirit into them and commission them to go out into the world. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he tells them. No, he commissioned them in all their humanity, all their doubts and fears and failings and flaws, to be his body in the world.

Just as he has commissioned US with all doubts and fears and failings and flaws. When we are baptized that same Holy Spirit as Jesus breathed into his disciples, that same Holy Spirit that appeared as tongues of flame in Acts, is breathed into us. God doesn't wait until we are perfect. He doesn't wait until we are ready. He doesn't wait until our fears and doubts are gone. He has called us just as we are.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," he's talking about us. He's blessing us. Faith is hard sometimes, and God knows that, but we are continually blessed for our belief, and therefore for the doubts that come with the territory.

I said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Well, the opposite of doubt is not certainty, but action. We all feel doubts from time to time, and our faith is tested, just as the faith of the disciples was tested. But we have been given the power to move past those doubts and to be Christ's body in the world. Perhaps it's when our uncertainty is at its greatest and our faith seems threatened to be overcome by doubt that we should be taking action and reaching out to others. It's then that we feel the power of God's Holy Spirit working in our lives, and it's then that our doubts will begin to disappear.

So let's not stay locked in our own upper room. Let's take that gift of the Holy Spirit, which we have been given so freely, and go out into our community, our state, our country, the world. Because along with the gift we have been given the great responsibility to use that gift to bring about the Kingdom of God. Just as the poor and unprotected and sick people of Jerusalem and beyond couldn't have found the disciples if they had stayed locked away in fear, those in need won't be able to find us if we stay locked away in here. We need to take that leap of faith, throw open those doors, and meet the people where they are. We have been commissioned by Jesus Christ, just as the disciples were, and the time to start working on it is right now.