

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 19, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"Thomas, The Believer"

"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!'" [John 20:27-28 NRSV]

For some reason known only to liturgical scholars and other non-mortals, the Feast of St. Thomas officially occurs each year on December 21st. But who in the world can remember a saint's day, much less celebrate it, only four days before Christmas? Therefore, since the Gospel lesson for the Second Sunday of Easter is the same for all three years of our lesson cycle, namely John 20:19-31, and since this is the classic story of Thomas acknowledging the presence of the risen Christ, and since it is much more convenient to remember and celebrate his memory on a beautiful spring day, I hereby (unofficially) designate this as "St. Thomas' Sunday", in Sparta, NC! Having that in mind, let's take a look at the Gospel selection that suggests such a celebration.

There are some who say that the Gospel of John reaches its climax in these five words from our text: "My Lord and my God!", for they declare the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ. In fact, John himself at the end of this same chapter declares that the entire Gospel was written "*so that (we) may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing (we) may have life in his name.*" (20:31)

But doesn't it seem strange that these words of faith and affirmation, "My Lord and my God", are spoken by the very man we've come to label as "Thomas, the doubter?" He is the one we have stereotyped as the "slow learner" among the disciples. Evidence to the contrary is right there in the story, and yet a two thousand year old "rumor mill" has given Thomas this label and carried it along for centuries. Has Thomas been justly placed a little lower than the other ten? Or has he been unfairly stuck with a negative label and reputation that he just hasn't been able to shake, even though he was every bit a believer like the others?

So the question is, was Thomas really a "doubter?" Was his reaction in today's lesson any different from the reaction of others? Is doubt so bad? I remember a bishop who thought so. He used to say, "I'm sometimes wrong, but *never in doubt!*" Would you believe his name was also "Thomas?" But let's do Thomas the Apostle justice and re-create the scene. Our text comes primarily from this same chapter of John, but is also supplemented by the other Gospel accounts.

Pretend that it is Sunday morning of the day we now call Easter. Mary Magdalene goes to the burial place and discovers that Jesus is gone! Then Peter and John arrive and also see that Jesus has disappeared. Everyone goes back home except Mary, who stays at the tomb, crying. Suddenly Mary sees Jesus but thinks he is the gardener until he speaks her name. Mary then runs back to the meeting place and tells the disciples she has seen Jesus.

You will notice that it doesn't say a thing about them believing. Mary tells the disciples that she has been with the risen Lord and yet we don't see any sudden "burst of faith" on their part! In fact, Mark says "They did *not* believe her!" Evidently it didn't have anything to do with the status of women either, because Mark and Luke recount the story of Jesus appearing to two men on the road to Emmaus who also didn't recognize or believe him. Then when they return to the disciples with their story, they too are doubted! Matthew says that even after people *saw* the resurrected Jesus, "some doubted!"

So the suggestion is that when we compare the initial reactions of the others with Thomas' reaction in today's text, Thomas doesn't look so bad! In fact, at least two accounts say that Jesus scolded them for being too stubborn to believe! Thomas, on the other hand, even though he needed proof, comes to belief completely. How does this make him any more a "doubter" than the others? Why indeed has Thomas had to carry this "label" for the rest of his scriptural life?

While it is rumored that Thomas came from a place in Israel that roughly translates into Missouri, in truth his doubting was no greater and no worse than the attitude of doubt expressed by the others. They too needed to see before they believed. They all "doubted" before they could accept the truth that Jesus was alive! This doubt is not a bad thing, at least not if it's on the road to belief. For example, doubt was part of the prayer of the repentant sinner when he said, "I believe, help thou my *unbelief*!" Thus, if it is a part of your struggle to know the risen Christ, if you see it as a challenge to know the Lord more fully, then doubt can be a *good thing*, a positive way to complete belief.

And yet, to know God completely is to have a God that is too small. No, our God of the Bible and of our experience is one of mystery and paradox, who is revealed to us bit by bit as we are ready to receive it. Our God is like the one described by the youngster who, when questioned by his priest about the Holy Spirit, said, "Well, it's a lot of air, but there's something there!"

Thomas' problem was not so much disbelief as it was that he had not yet *seen* the risen Christ. And he wasn't about to accept a "second-hand" faith. He wanted to experience Jesus for himself. And when he finally did, he couldn't help himself. He was so overcome with awe that he declared, "My Lord and my God!" It was then that Jesus uttered the "ninth" beatitude, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!" It would seem that Jesus knew that the time was coming when we could not put our fingers in his side. He knew how tough it would be for those of us who in our minds really are from Missouri.

Thomas, then, was one believer among many, not the doubter. Thomas was the one who looked at that wounded healer and declared the very presence of the Almighty. Will we trust his witness and believe? Will we be able to look upon our Lord and say, "My God!"

I loved my old bishop, Tom Fraser - but I think probably he was "*often* wrong", and possibly "often in doubt." But *he believed* what he said and in what he did. And so I and many others listened, and we too believed. Like his counterpart the Apostle, this Thomas was also a believer! Therefore doubt if you must, but allow your doubt to lead you into belief.

Who knows, you might even be given a “saint’s day” on the calendar!