



SAINT LUKE'S

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
YEAR B

NUMBERS 21:4-9
EPHESIANS 2:1-10
JOHN 3:14-21
PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

APRIL 8, 2018

The Second Sunday of Easter, or as it can be more colloquially known, 'Doubting Thomas Sunday', will be a day on which many preachers attempt the noble task of rescuing poor Tom from his unfortunate moniker. Certainly, this is a worthy mission: Thomas, the disciple who was ready to ask the questions the other disciples were too afraid to ask ("Lord, how can we know the way?" *John 14*); Thomas, the disciple who was ready to go with the Lord to the death when the other disciples were scared of being stoned by the Jewish authorities; Thomas, who faithfully remained with the apostles even after the crucifixion of Jesus. It is unfortunate that his faithful discipleship is eclipsed in our collective memory by this passage at the end of John's gospel.

But I don't want to spend today's time only on rehabilitating our view of Thomas. Instead, I don't think I would be extrapolating too much from my own experience when I say that Thomas' questions and desire for some form of tangible confirmation feel all-too-familiar for people of faith in the twenty-first century.

Whereas many moments of conversion or revelation in the New Testament feel sudden, a rapid shift of understanding in which faith crystallizes in a single instant, I'm confident that many of us here would describe their process of coming to belief as a much more gradual experience.

As I think about this, I am struck by how John talks about 'belief' here in this gospel, and how the author of 1 John is so adamant that this

belief is firmly grounded in something which is concrete: “We declare to you what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands...”. So too, the Gospel of John ends the story of Thomas by stating the express purpose of the text is so that you might come to believe, or, in a turn of phrase from other manuscripts, ‘may continue to believe’.

Continue to believe.

Jesus states a sort of inverse when he says to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus is describing you and me in this phrase and I can’t shake the sense of ongoing progression, motion, behind both his and John’s words.

Because, if I am honest, I cannot describe my own belief in Christ, my *faith* as it were, as a line beginning with unbelief, interrupted by a singular encounter with Jesus, and ending conclusively with a conviction grounded in bedrock. Instead, my experience of faith feels much more cyclical; it ebbs and flows in correspondence with my life, and I find myself in perpetual need of encountering Christ. I have been the Thomas of emphatic doubt (“Unless I put my hand in his side, I will not believe”) and the Thomas overwhelmed by ineffable Grace: (My Lord and my God!). Sometimes I am both within myself simultaneously.

While many of us have experienced singular conversion moments, I

have only seen irreparable spiritual harm done by the insistence that one must maintain an unwavering faith, must always be the Thomas who has met Jesus and proclaims it loudly. Instead, I believe we are in perpetual need of seeking and discovering Jesus; sometimes His presence appears unfamiliar or obscured, like to Mary in the garden on the morning of the resurrection, while at other times, we encounter Jesus very clearly, like Thomas, like the disciples on the seashore. God can handle our expressions of fear or doubt; It is honest and fair to express your frustration when God seems distant. To 'continue to believe' requires us to actively look for Jesus in new and unexpected areas of our life, remaining unsatisfied until we encounter Him. Would that we challenged God to make Himself tangibly manifest in our lives more often!

Yasutani-roshi, in his lectures on Zen Buddhism for Westerners, describes the three pillars of Zen practice as 1) strong faith, 2) strong doubt, and 3) strong practice. In relating the interaction between strong faith (or, immovable conviction) and strong doubt, he says: It is a doubt which... 'inevitably springs from strong faith. It is a doubt as to why we and the world should appear so imperfect, so full of...strife, and suffering, when in fact our deep faith tells us the opposite is true...It is as though we knew perfectly well we were millionaires and yet found ourselves in dire need without a penny in our pockets.'¹

We proclaim this Easter the eternal truth that Christ is Risen and has defeated death, and yet we live in a world marked by death and

¹ Kapleau, Philip, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, p.65

suffering. We proclaim the defeat of sin, and yet we know how frail we are and how numerous our shortcomings can be. Our insistence, like, Thomas for concrete proof of that which our heart tells us is Capital-T 'True' compels us to engage with this tension between experience and Hope. To define it another way, I have often thought of faith as the residue left behind from the prolonged friction between our Hope and our grief. This is the 'strong practice' of which Yasutani spoke: Remaining in the place of hopeful search until we find that which our hearts know to be true.

The key to this practice is found within the community entrusted with the Hope of Christ's Resurrection: The Church. Thomas experienced delay in his encounter with the Risen Jesus because he was not present with community of those who had gathered in Jesus' name. This is not to say that Christ is only present within the confines of a church building, but that to 'continue to believe', to continue to Hope in what we know to be True, is a communal and collective endeavor. We do not seek Jesus alone, but as a spiritual family, a body which collectively holds and seeks this Hope together. We serve as reminders of Jesus' presence to one another; we encourage one another to continue to seek in spite of our doubt; and we support each other when the Truth of Christ's presence feels distant or dim.

This Easter, know that you do not rejoice, or serve, or seek alone. We believe, and continue to believe, and will come to believe, together, as Christ's body. May God grant us perseverance in our continued belief.

AMEN

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