

SERMON
2nd Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2004

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 118:14-29
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Woody Allen, the well-known comedian, has said that he would believe in God if God would send him a sign – such as making a large deposit in a Bank Account under the name; “Woody Allen.”

Frederick Buechner, a novelist and sometimes preacher, has posed the question; “Why doesn’t God just send us a sign to dispel all of our doubts. Perhaps God could write a message in the sky using the universe, with the sun and the moon and the stars. It could read; ‘I am God! I really do exist!!!’” Wouldn’t that make life so much easier?

We too have this desire to have a sign from God. We want concrete evidence for the things we believe. We don’t like to live with doubt in our lives. We want everything to be perfectly clear, black and white, right and wrong.

The famous philosopher Rene Descarte also wrestled with doubts. He said; “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” He desperately wanted to find the things that were true.

So he thought that he would take a different approach. Instead of verifying everything and trying to prove things true, he decided to doubt everything first, and eliminate those things that were not true.

He doubted the existence of a natural realm and a supernatural realm of reality. He even doubted his own existence. But then one day he found one thing that he absolutely could not doubt. The fact that he was doubting! So he took that a step further.

“Obviously, I exist if I doubt that I exist. My doubt that I exist proves that I exist, for I have to exist to be able to doubt. Therefore, I can’t doubt that I exist.” Hence, he concluded that there is at least one fact in the universe that is beyond doubt.

The end result of his line of reasoning was a phrase that has become the most well-known philosophical statement of all time: “I think; therefore, I exist.” Or another way you may of heard it is; “I think; therefore, I am.”

Now this may seem like a lot of nonsense to some of you. But you must admit that there are times when perhaps we think that we know something for sure, but then we begin to doubt.

Our Gospel story today talks about a disciple named Thomas. Poor ole ”doubting Thomas”. This guy has gotten grief for 2000 years. My guess is that he will continue to catch grief for the next 2000 years or until the Lord returns.

To be honest, I feel for Thomas. Our tradition has singled him out as having an inferior faith because he actually expressed his doubt about the resurrection. He made his reservations known out-loud. And because of that, he has the dubious distinction of being the poster child for skepticism.

But you know what is even worse? Most people are familiar with the term “doubting Thomas” even if they have never heard of this biblical story! His name is simply synonymous with doubt.

All you have to do is pick up a Webster’s Dictionary and there it is. Actually it is in two places; under “d” for doubt and under “t” for Thomas.

According to Webster, the definition for a “doubting Thomas” is “a person who habitually doubts.” My gosh! I personally believe that that might be overstating the case just a little bit.

Nonetheless, Thomas has become the scapegoat for the church that has been known to say that doubt is wrong.

How about you? Have you ever been told that you are somehow lacking in faith if you have doubts? Perhaps you are afraid to admit that you have doubts because of what people might say.

We get the impression that we are not allowed to ask the hard questions without being labeled a cynic, a skeptic, or a liberal. But since when are questions bad? Since when is it wrong to admit that we don't understand everything? Since when is it wrong to ask God to clarify something?

Well, I think that I will be bold this morning. Let me say right here in front of everyone. I have doubts. Every day I have doubts, regarding my faith. I expect that these doubts will nag me to the day I die. But, I also think that I am in good company.

Abraham and Sarah doubted that God would give them children. Moses doubted that God could use him to free the Israelites from Egypt. Peter may have walked on water for a short time, but then doubted, and began to sink. John the Baptist doubted when he was put in prison: “Are you the one (referring to Jesus), or do I seek another?”

Read the accounts of Job, or the Psalms. Both are filled with uncertainties, complaints, and questions of God. Even Jesus, while hanging on the cross, cried out to God; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Thomas is just one in a long line of faithful people who have raised their voices to ask the hard, yet faithful questions.

Brothers and sisters, doubting is not the opposite of faith. I would suggest that doubting is what keeps us seeking a stronger faith. I have told many of you this before, but it is said that the definition of theology is, “faith seeking understanding,” “faith seeking understanding.”

You see, if we understood everything, if we never had any doubts, then why would we even need faith. Indeed, I guess we would be God.

Therefore, we have faith, even though we still have doubts. And this faith invites us into conversation. This faith is when we are willing to embrace our doubts and ask the questions. This faith is believing in something that is beyond our ability to comprehend, but are not afraid to try.

For the Christian faith is not all cut and dried. It cannot be reduced to a set of rules, where everything fits – where everything makes sense – where all we have to do is connect the dots. That is the kind of thing the Pharisees tried to do.

They tried to explain everything through hundreds of laws and rules. That way, so they thought, everything could be neat and tidy. Faith and truth would be perfectly clear. And if something didn't fit within that set of laws or rules, they rejected it as heresy or blasphemy.

Consequently, their hearts were closed to the message of Jesus, because Jesus questioned the rules and broke the laws. Jesus said that seeking God's approval had nothing to do with following a set of rules or laws. Rather, it was about a relationship that is based on faith.

And like with Thomas, this faith begins with an encounter. It has to begin with an encounter, because without it we are unable to believe. Without an encounter with God, the resurrection seems as silly as seeing Elvis in the grocery store buying peanuts. It is ridiculous.

But an encounter with the risen Christ changes all of that. Suddenly, the absurd becomes a new reality. The rules that once governed our believing, and our disbelieving, are blurred. And even the lines between life and death, which once seemed so absolute, are crossed.

Make no mistake about it, this is a story of doubt. But it is also a story of God's ability to change that doubt into faith. Not to erase the doubt, or get rid of it completely. But to overcome it with an irresistible encounter with the living God.

And this encounter didn't happen because the disciples went searching for their Lord. Remember, when they found that Jesus' body was missing, they ran away and hid. It was Jesus who went searching for them. Jesus came and stood among them as they were hiding in a house behind locked doors.

And isn't that the way it is with us? We remain in our own skepticism until the Lord breaks through the locked doors of our hearts.

The wonderful news in all of this is that God searches and finds us even when we don't want to be found. Even when we lock ourselves away from the world; even when we resist and try to control our own lives, Jesus breaks through that door.

The stone door that barred the tomb couldn't restrain him. He had conquered death and he was going to make it known to his friends and to the world. And also, no flimsy wooden door could stop him from breaking into the room where his disciples were gathered. And when they saw him, they rejoiced. And they cried out in faith.

As we continue to celebrate our Lord's glorious resurrection, we do so in faith. We will still have doubts. We will still wonder at the mystery of God. And we will still search for proof. For we want proof.

However, I believe that the proof is before us. Look around this morning. Look at the people sitting to your right and to your left – in front of you and behind you. This is the living proof that Jesus rose from the dead. Why else would we be here 2000 years after the fact?

It is the risen Christ. It is his Spirit that calls, gathers and sends us each week with his word of love and grace – with his precious body and blood. So like Thomas, we can also say, with confidence; “My Lord and my God.” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.

How many of you have ever heard someone say; “I’d have to see it to believe it”? Maybe some of you have said that before.

Let’s say that you have a friend who says that they can eat 100 donuts in 2 minutes. You might say; “I’d have to see that to believe it.”

You probably would think that they were lying unless you actually saw them do it with your own eyes.

So, do we always have to be able to see things in order to believe that they exist? What are some things that we can’t see but still know that they are there?

Well, let’s see – we can’t see the air all around us, but when we take a breath, it goes into our lungs. We can’t see the wind, but if we would drop a piece of paper on the ground, it would probably blow away. We can’t see the sound waves from me speaking to you right now, but you can hear my voice. We can’t see the love that our parents and friends have for us, but we feel their hugs and hear their loving words, and we know that their love is real.

So let me ask you this. Can we see Jesus – the real Jesus, not just pictures of him? Then how do we know that he is real?

We believe what the Bible says. We feel Jesus’ love in our hearts. And we can see the way people change – the way they become kinder and help others. We can’t say that we have seen Jesus with our own eyes, but still, we believe in him.

In our Bible story today, a follower of Jesus named Thomas would not believe that Jesus rose from the dead unless he could touch him.

So do you know what happened? Jesus came to him and told Thomas to put his hands in the nail wounds in his hands and feet and in his spear wound in his side. Thomas believed.

And then Jesus said; “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who haven’t seen me and believe anyway.”

That would be you and me. Jesus loves us very much and we are blessed. We have not seen or touched Jesus, but still we believe that Jesus is alive.

Let us pray....Jesus, thank you for being alive and for being here with us. And thank you for helping us to believe that you will always be with us. Amen.