

**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
Year C**

[RCL] Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31; Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150

Doubt is a complicated matter. It can indicate a critical mind, one that asks questions, and never takes things at face value. The opposite is a gullible mind: one that is the delight of unscrupulous sales persons, dangerous politicians, and many televangelists.

There's another type of doubt, one driven by deep emotion, an emotion stimulated by loss. It's a form of despair, a despair that clings to loss and refuses to believe that there is any future other than one described by that which is lost. Life will never be the same again. Friends assure us that we will get over our loss of a job, an ambition, our loss of a relationship or the death of a dear one but we don't want to hear it. We can't believe it. Saint Thomas's doubt is of this second type.

Instead of becoming the patron saint of those who never take things at face value, Thomas might well be the hero of people who are never on time. For some reason he missed the earliest encounters with the Risen Lord. About his statement: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." We will get to that in a moment.

Thomas first makes an entrance in Saint John's Gospel shortly after Lazarus rises from the dead. He tells Jesus that all the disciples will go with him to die. Later, when Jesus tells them that he is going away to prepare a place for his followers, Thomas assumes that Jesus is talking about some geographical destination and says that he doesn't know where Jesus is going or the way there.

He must have found a safe place to hide in his grief and despair after the crucifixion because he missed the first encounters in the garden, on the road to Emmaus, and in the first of the two encounters in the upper room.

We really don't know enough about Thomas to assess his character, let alone to accuse him of being a habitual doubter. He's Jewish. He's a twin but we don't know who his twin was. He's devoted enough to Jesus to at least contemplate dying for him. He doesn't want to be separated from his Lord. He wants to know where Jesus is going and how to get to him. And for all that, Thomas isn't there for Jesus when he is arrested, tried, and put to death. He runs away.

After the crucifixion, as he hides in the city, he must be a bundle of fear, grief and guilt. There are few human emotions so devastating. To then discover that his friends, equally guilty, equally grieving, had been visited by Jesus and given authority to heal the very emotions with which he suffered was more than he could absorb or manage. Filled with shame he blurts out: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas won't believe it for himself. He certainly won't believe it from the mouths of his friends, who have been empowered to restore relationships: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas still hangs around, even though he is convinced that nothing can ever get better for him, that he deserves nothing better. The next week Jesus appears again, says Shalom, and immediately invites Thomas to touch his wounds. Like a dam bursting, Thomas's fear, grief, shame, and hopelessness floods out and he collapses in adoration. "My Lord and my God".

The writer of John's Gospel, perhaps the Beloved Disciple perhaps not, concludes the story by telling us why he selected this one from among all the incidents he could have recounted. He writes: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

In one way or another we all stumble into life moments when we are seized by fear, remorse, grief, and loss. Our lack of belief that things can get better isn't atheism or agnosticism, but rather a deeply personal conviction that we are the exception, the one left out. We may even believe that the Christian community is empowered reconcile, restore and forgive and that priests and bishops are chosen agents of reconciliation. There's a much-neglected service of reconciliation in the prayer book. Yet we still exclude ourselves as if clinging to remorse rather than the life we deserve.

I wonder whether "John" points us deeper in that direction, that "Way, Truth and Life"? Is there significance in the gap of a week between encounters, one that the first Christians would have grasped? Is this a seven-day gap between Lord's Days? As we do, the Early Christians offered the Shalom, the Peace, before the Eucharist, during which Jesus comes among us and invites us to explore his wounds. As we touch him, he enters us and, by faith, we let loose everything that has obscured his presence. He offers new life when we couldn't believe one possible, and we drop to our knees and murmur: "My Lord and my God".

If legend is true, St. Thomas obtained new life and took the message of reconciliation and forgiveness as far as India. His tomb, venerated by Christians and non-Christians alike is the heart of the Mar Thoma, Lord Thomas, Church with whom we enjoy communion.

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Published by the Office of Formation of the The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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