

Sermon—May 1, 2011

Believe It or Not

John 20:19-31

I am enthralled with magic. I am enthralled with magic—if I can find out how it is done. I cannot stand not knowing how a trick is performed. I drive my husband crazy. Seneca, in his teenage years, was a magician, and although he does not know how all the magical acts today are executed, he dismisses my anxiety about having to understand incredible illusions by telling me, “It’s all mirrors.” And, of course, my next question is, “Well, where are the mirrors?” A few years ago, I met a professional magician. I learned right then that there are different levels of magicians, and this man was a master. He happened to be visiting one of my elderly parishioners when I stopped by. And I thought I was finally going to find out the mystery that has baffled me since I saw the magician, David Blaine, levitate right in front of people on the sidewalk. This man said he could not divulge that secret. I immediately forgot the fact that a very ill member of the church was not getting any of my attention, I was bent on persuading the illusionist to tell me how levitation was done. Out of desperation, wanting to get away from me, he gave me some hints. But, I just can’t stand not seeing and knowing how the trick works!!!!

From one of the resurrection stories this morning from the gospel of John, we have the disciples telling Thomas the fantastic news that, while he was out and about Jerusalem and they were frightened, huddled in a locked room together, they had seen the risen Savior. They asked him: *Would you believe. . .that Jesus is risen? Would you believe. . .that Jesus who was crucified is alive. Would you believe. . .that he appeared to Mary and to all of us?*

And Thomas’ response is an emphatic, *No, I would not believe such an idle tale, unless I saw him myself.*

In spite of such unbelieving rhetoric, the time has come to rehabilitate the reputation of Thomas. Poor Thomas has had to walk the corridors of history known as *Doubting Thomas*.

It does not matter that Thomas was no better and no worse than the average disciple who would not have believed this story either. No better or worse than any of us would have been—I would have to have seen a risen Lord, wouldn't you, wouldn't anyone?

It does not seem to matter that tradition has Thomas carrying the gospel to India, where there still exists an order known as Christians of St. Thomas of India. Nor does it seem to matter that this same tradition has Thomas suffering martyrdom for the faith. No-o-o-o, he will **always** be *Doubting Thomas*.

Thomas has gotten a bad rap. His reputation as a skeptic is not only undeserved, but is also the result of a too casual reading of the text. After all, today's gospel lesson is not the only place in Scripture where Thomas is seen in action. What do other scriptural passages tell us about him? And has the label worn by Thomas as a "doubter" colored the way we read the various accounts of Thomas? Can Thomas teach us anything about what it means to believe? Obviously, I think he can, or I wouldn't be preaching on Thomas today!

The Gospel of John begins to flesh out the personality of Thomas in an incident surrounding the death of Jesus' friend, Lazarus in the 11th chapter. Jesus tells the disciples that the time has come for them to go to Bethany that they might comfort Lazarus' grieving family.

The disciples can hardly believe what they are hearing. Given the hostility of some persons in Jerusalem toward Jesus and the proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem, to go to Bethany at a time like this was nothing short of putting one's head into the mouth of an angry lion.

Thomas then speaks up and addressing himself to his fellow disciples, says, "Let us also go to Bethany, that we may die with Jesus."

To make such a statement, to take such a stand, requires no insignificant amount of courage and devotion. Here was one who was willing to lay down his own life in a spirit of solidarity with his Lord—no other disciple made that declaration. Is the courage of Thomas and his willingness to die diminished because of his later caution surrounding what he perceived as hysterical reports of Jesus' resurrection? If not, then why don't we

remember him as “Courageous Thomas” rather than “Doubting Thomas”? Why should one event define the life of Thomas any more than another? This first glimpse of Thomas should remind us that there is more to a person than a convenient “sound bite” of one experience.

The next time we hear from Thomas is in John 14. Jesus is speaking somewhat cryptically about his departure to do some heavenly site preparation—remember, he tells the disciples, *I’m going to prepare a place for you*. Thomas admits that he, for one, doesn’t have a clue about what Jesus is talking about. *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way*. This, in turn, leads Jesus to speak in unambiguous terms that even we can understand, providing one of the most memorable passages in the New Testament. *I am the way, the truth, and the life*.

It took remarkable, self-assured honesty for Thomas to acknowledge that, for him, Jesus was not making any sense. So, why don’t we call him “Honest Thomas” instead of “Doubting Thomas”? Because of *his* willingness to admit ignorance, the disciples and we are all the wiser. Because of his honest confession, we are the recipients of hope-filled words that have sustained us across the years in our own moments of loss and separation.

The third scene in which Thomas plays a significant role is found in today’s gospel text. Jesus appears among the disciples fully aware of how incomprehensible his appearance is to the mind and experiences of these gathered ones. He takes the initiative and shows them in his hands and side the markings of the crucifixion—because they initially had the same reaction as Thomas.

All of which leads to a more interesting question, which is, “Why has the Christian community developed such a negative attitude toward doubt?” We have been reared in a religious environment in which **doubt is posed as the antithesis of faith**. And this story of Thomas is often used to reinforce that lesson. But isn’t the “doubt vs. faith” dichotomy a false issue? Is not the real enemy of faith *unbelief* rather than doubt? I think so. And what is more, I think that doubt has a constructive and very positive role to play in the exercise of faith.

So what am I to do? I don’t want to be a “Doubting Thomas,” but I am frequently have unresolved questions of faith.

We, as the church often dismiss or discount doubts and questions as the products of an immature faith—Sometimes, though we really can't answer the questions raised, we simply repeat the same religious platitudes that we we've heard all our lives and questioned. Sometimes in our conviction that we possess some of the answers, we act as though we have all of the answers. The three *least* used words in our religious vocabulary are, "I don't know." When you go through DICIPLE BIBLE STUDY (which I hope we will experience in this church), you are given the principles in which the Bible will be studied in that particular class—listen to the first three:

1. *No one has a monopoly on understanding either God's Word or the words of the Scripture.*
2. *We must assume everyone has integrity and not accuse one another of being unchristian, no matter how unusual are the opinions.*
3. *We must further assume that we will arrive at different understandings of portions of Scripture and that that will not disturb God as much as it will some of us!*

And even with that being said, there is still a feeling sometimes that those in the class will be thought less of if they doubt or raise questions.

Could we not, however, respond more positively to these questionings and doubts by using them as teaching moments? Here the example of Thomas can help us. We can learn from Thomas that even though we don't know where our journey may lead, it is enough that our Lord makes the journey with us.

One of John Wesley's last comments before he died was, "The best of all is, God is with us." We might not know much, but that we believe.

We can learn from Thomas that in those times when our faith needs the reinforcement of tangible reality, it is good to know that our Lord does not meet our doubts with chastisement, but with a manifestation of grace.

Our congregations are filled with persons who hold unresolved issues of faith and belief—and don't look around at people who might be nodding their heads—we all have questions, but there is often no safely zone within our churches where these doubts can be raised and legitimized without the questioner being made to feel like a second-class Christian, or maybe not even a Christian or believer in God. Instead we hold before doubters the negative image of Thomas. the Doubter, himself.

But what if we rehabilitated the reputation of Thomas as one who had the courage to admit his lack of understanding?

And what if we celebrated the willingness of Thomas to express his honest doubts?

*Would you believe. . .*that this could change the complexion of our congregations?

*Would you believe. . .*we could help persons to see that faith is a belief held in the presence of doubts rather than a belief that removes all doubt?

*Would you believe. . .*that we might then discover persons empowered to openly discuss their doubts in their individual struggles of faith?

*Would you believe. . .*that we might be seen by unbelievers, not as folks who have all the answers, but as persons like themselves who hold a measure of faith despite our uncertainties?

*Would you believe. . .*in other words, that we might give the church a more human face?

We need to embrace the truth learned from the example of Thomas that doubts may not always lead to answers, but they almost always lead to growth. ***Believe it or not!***

Frederick Buechner: ***If you don't have any doubts about scripture, about issues of faith, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep faith awake and moving.***

