

Easter Two B
April 8, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James
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Acts 4:32-35 Psalm 133 I John 1:1-2:2 John 20:19-31

DOUBT

Occasionally I have doubted the resurrection. You may have heard me say that last Sunday morning. Honestly, sometimes it just doesn't seem possible. No wonder Thomas doubted. Thomas has gotten a bad rap in being branded as the doubter, the one who did not believe that Jesus had been resurrected. Oh it is true enough that he was not present when the other disciples first saw the LORD. It is true enough that his response was that he would not believe unless he saw, could put his hand in his side and his finger in the nail holes. It is true enough that Jesus had heard this questioning claim and invited him to do just what he had protested when they finally met. But what about the others of the disciples? None of them had believed the women who were the first at the empty tomb. None of them believed the pair from Emmaus. Evidently, they hadn't believed Peter either, since they were hidden fearfully

behind locked doors on the night that Jesus suddenly came among them. Jesus also invited *them* to check out the stigmata. Each of the disciples were doubters until they faced the irrefutable evidence. Who wouldn't be?

Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Frederick Buechner wrote that 'Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.' You mean doubt may have a purpose in the life of faith? That is always been my experience. I trained in science. In science the important grasp of a subject leads to asking testable questions, questions around which you can design a reasonable experiment. And when the experiment is done you have a probability statement that the question you tested has a 90 or 95 or say 98% probability of having occurred. Still 2 or 5 or 10 times out of a 100 your result failed to occur. Out of that experiment comes a new question, a new testable question. Follow this pattern for 20 years, and you will be an expert in an undeniable way about that subject. But guess

what? As long as you live, because you are the expert, you will have questions, new ones about your phenomena. The mark of the devoted inquirer is the quality of her questions. I think that is true in the Christian faith. Don't ever fear your questions. Don't ever fear your doubts, or where they will lead you. If you discover the truth, you will be in the presence of God, for God is truth.

Those early Christians were convinced early on, that's for sure. Luke tells us that they were of one heart and one mind. They did not have anyone needy among them, for they shared indiscriminately, and came to embody the Hebrew ideal found in Deuteronomy 15:4. When Jesus showed them his hands and feet, they were convinced.

I read a story by Leslie Flynn who told of a small boy being raised in a frontier city by his grandmother. One night the house catches on fire. The grandmother, trying to rescue the boy who was asleep in the bedroom upstairs, is overcome by the smoke and dies in the fire. This frontier city doesn't have much of a fire department. A crowd gathers around

the house and they hear a small boy crying out for help. The lower floor is a wall of flames and no one seems to know what to do. Suddenly, a man pushes through the crowd and begins climbing an iron drainage pipe which runs to the roof. The pipe is hot from the fire, but he makes it to a second floor window. The man crawls through the window and locates the boy. With the crowd cheering encouragement, the man climbs back down the hot iron pipe with the boy on his back and his arms around his neck.

A few weeks later, a public meeting was held to determine in whose custody the boy would be placed. Each person wanting the child would be allowed to make a brief statement. The first man said, "I have a farm and would give the boy a good home. He would grow up on the farm and learn a trade."

The second person to speak was the local school teacher. She said, "I am a school teacher and I would see to it that he received a good education." Finally, the banker said, "Mrs. Morton and I would be able to give the boy a fine home and a fine education. We would like him to come and

live with us." The presiding officer looked around and asked, "Is there anyone else who would like to say anything?" From the back row, a man rose and said, "These other people may be able to offer some things I can't. All I can offer is my love." Then, he slowly removed his hands from his coat pockets. A gasp went up from the crowd because his hands were scarred terribly from climbing up and down the hot pipe. The boy recognized the man as the one who had saved his life and ran into his waiting arms.

The farmer, teacher and the banker simply sat down. Everyone knew what the decision would be. The scarred hands proved that this man had given more than all the others.

Robert L. Allen, His Finest Days: Ten Sermons for Holy Week and the Easter

So it was with Jesus. We are not asked, actually, to answer all of our questions by demonstration. We are asked to answer them by faith. I'm reading a novel about a young English woman who moves to Canada and there, after a few years, marries a young Irishman. Her dream is to give love so completely and to receive it so completely that they both will be transformed. It didn't work out that way. He

tended to express his love through his efforts for her and as she grew older, she felt as alone as she had before she married. In the end she has to discover what it means to love without reserve, and when she does, she finds her empty spaces filled.

Sojourners and Strangers, Michael D. O'Brien. Faith is a strange way of knowing, knowing that love is the answer, that what we have experienced and can experience in Jesus Christ, is love pure and simple. For God so loved the world that gave his only son, even though he did not receive back in equal measure.

When I was in seminary, I came across the writings of an African missiologist, one who studies the bringing of the Gospel to a foreign culture, like that in Africa. D. T. Niles may have been the most brilliant and passionate theologian I read in those years. He once concluded a lecture series by saying, "Let me conclude with a story told by a famous French bishop to his congregation. Three university students of Paris were walking along the road one Good Friday afternoon. They noticed crowds of people going to the churches to make their confession. The students began to discuss this

custom of the 'unenlightened,' and talked in rather cynical terms about the survival of religion, which they described as superstition.

Suddenly two of the students turned to the third, who was the leader among them, and said to him, 'Will you go into this church and tell the priest there what we have been saying to each other?' 'Sure, I will,' he said, and went in. He stood in the same queue of those who were going to their confession, and when his turn came, he looked at the priest and said, 'Father, I have come here merely to tell you that Christianity is a dying institution and that religion is a superstition.' The priest looked at the young man keenly and said, 'Why did you come here, my son, to tell me this?' And the student told him of his conversation with his friends. The priest listened carefully and then said: 'All right, I want you to do one thing for me before you go. You accepted the challenge of your friends and came here; now accept my challenge to you. Walk up to the chancel and you will find there a large wooden cross and on it the figure of Jesus crucified. I want you to stand before that cross and say

these words: 'Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn.' The student looked defiant but, to save face, agreed. He went up and stood before that cross and said it: 'Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn.' He came back to the priest and said, 'I have done it.' 'Do it once more,' said the priest; 'after all, it means nothing to you.' The student went back and looked at the cross for some time and the figure on it, and then he stammered it out: 'Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn.' He returned to the priest and said, 'I have done it; I am going now.'

The priest stopped him. 'Once more,' he said, just once more and you can go. The young man walked up to the chancel and looked at that cross again, and at the Crucified. He stood there for a long time. Then he came back to the priest and said, 'Father, can I make my confession now?' The bishop stunned the congregation when he concluded with these words: 'My dear people, that young man was me.'" D. T. Niles, Preaching the Gospel of the Resurrection.

May I suggest, that he was also Thomas? Dorothy Sayers says this about the character Thomas: it is unexpected,

but extraordinarily convincing, that the one absolutely unequivocal statement in the whole gospel of the divinity of Jesus should come from Doubting Thomas. It is the only place where the word 'God' is used without qualification of any kind, and in the most unambiguous form of words. And he does not say it ecstatically, or with a cry of astonishment but with flat conviction, as of one acknowledging irrefutable evidence that $2 + 2 = 4$, that the sun is in the sky. Thomas says, you are my Lord and my God! Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (London: Victor Collanz, 1943), 319-20. May it be that so say we all, "You are my Lord and my God! *Amen.*