

When in doubt

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson, Rector-Emeritus, in the Episcopal Parish of Saint John the Evangelist, Hingham, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2022.

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. John 20: 29.

On that first day after the discovery of the empty tomb, the disciples are hiding in fear of persecution. The reference to their fear of the Jews has been wrongly interpreted as an excuse for acts of anti-Semitism by blaming them for Christ's death. While the religious establishment opposed many of Jesus' efforts to reform his Jewish faith, it was ultimately the Roman government that condemned Jesus to death.

Though they are meeting behind locked doors, to their amazement, the risen Christ appears among them and offers them the traditional eastern greeting, *Peace be with you.* (John 20:21) In commissioning them to be sent out to proclaim the Good News of redemption, the scriptures describe how Jesus *breathed on them.* (John 20:22) The elements of air, wind, and breath are a metaphorical reference to the nature of God's Holy Spirit. In Genesis, we read how God breathes life into Adam to become a living soul. (Genesis 2:7) In Ezekiel, we read how God calls upon the four winds to breathe life into the dry bones of the exiled nation. (Ezekiel 37:10) In a few weeks we will hear about the Holy Spirit at Pentecost breathing life into the newly formed Christian community. (Acts 2:1)

Jesus commissions his disciples to declare God's forgiveness by telling them, *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* (John 20:23) At the very core of Christian teaching is the proclamation that God's forgiveness assures reconciliation for all who are alienated from God and from each other.

The disciples were all there to witness the dramatic appearance of the risen Christ, all, that is, except Thomas. He is the only one of the disciples who has the misfortune to miss out on this momentous event. We don't know where he was, but he certainly qualifies for being the patron saint of those who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. We can only imagine his disappointment when he realizes what he missed and we can understand his doubt, his skepticism and his cautious stance. He doesn't want to appear to be gullible and insists on being shown proof. He wants to see the resurrected Christ face to face. He wants to see the marks in his hands and his side before he will believe. A week later, Thomas has the opportunity to see the risen Christ for himself. He now has all the proof he needs and exclaims, *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28) Would not any of us welcome the opportunity to come face to face with such evidence? Happy are they who have not such proof and have come to believe. (John 20:29)

We can't help but admire Thomas for his honesty about his skepticism. He will not accept second hand testimony. He has to see for himself if he is going to believe. His skepticism is the basis of what became a profound belief. We all have occasional doubts about what we believe. It is at those times that we need to think through our doubts and skepticism to develop a personal and more authentic faith.

Years ago, there was a group that gathered here each Sunday after the service to discuss the sermon. I was flattered by such attention paid to what they heard until I learned that they called themselves, *The Skeptic's Corner.* They were discussing what they could neither believe nor

accept. In time, the leader of the group worked through his tough questions and doubts and wrote a long paper on how he came to have a profound belief.

Our spiritual lives ebb and flow over time as we experience occasional doubts and uncertainties about what we believe. Though we may be tempted at those times to withdraw from church life, it is critical to work through our questions and doubts in the context of the church community with their own variety of beliefs and perspectives. It is in dealing with our doubts that makes it possible for us to emerge with a stronger assurance of what we believe and accept.

Mature Christianity requires an inquiring mind and critical thinking to meet the challenge of understanding the meaning of the events of Easter. Thus, honest doubt is not something to be feared and avoided, but is a companion on the way to a more authentic faith.

I find that there is so much in life for which there is little or no explanation. I have yet to figure out why some people think and behave the way they do. It is a challenge to understand and respect those who come at life from a completely different perspective. We can't help but wonder why those who engage in evil prosper while the good people suffer misfortune. It is one of the great mysteries of our time how an autocratic Russian despot can get away with the brazen slaughter of the innocent people of Ukraine. Winston Churchill long ago described Russian national interest as a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.

In our bewilderment, we cannot help but wonder why a beneficent and loving God allows the evil that causes human suffering. There are no easy answers, but the fact is that much of the evil in the world is the result of the willful misuse of human free will. When it comes to disease and natural disasters such as earthquakes, fire and flood, all are all part of the natural order of the universe.

In our time, the church has wrestled with the issues of equality with regard to race, gender, sexuality and the definition of marriage. We have worked through these issues to affirm justice and equality for all to live and work and love as they choose. There will always be those who refuse to change their mind beyond accepted tradition. Christian teaching is based on scripture, reason, personal experience and tradition. I love tradition as much as anyone, but we must bear in mind the important distinction between *genuine tradition that is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism that is nothing more than the dead faith of the living.* (Jaroslav Pelikan)

To work through some of the great mysteries of life requires facing them head on. Like Thomas, many of those who have experienced serious doubts about faith have emerged to proclaim boldly how the power of the risen Christ has changed their lives forever.