

Doubts and questions

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 12, 2015.

Jesus said to him...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. John 20:29

Following the resurrection, the disciples meet behind closed doors for fear of persecution by the authorities. The sound of foot-steps or a knock at the door could mean certain arrest and punishment.

In the safety of their seclusion, Jesus appears and empowers them with God's Holy Spirit to mark the beginning of his mission to bring the Good News of God's love to all people.

Saint John records that, "Jesus breathed on them." Air and wind are images found in Scripture to describe the nature of the Holy Spirit, God's unseen power whose affects we both see and feel. In the book of Genesis, we read that God breathes the breath of life into Adam to become a living soul. In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, God calls upon the four winds to breathe life into the dry bones of the nation of Israel. At Pentecost, the invocation of the Holy Spirit is experienced as a mighty wind breathing life into the apostles, empowering them to be the living and visible presence of Christ.

In giving them the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells his disciples that by accepting God's forgiveness our sins are removed. If rejected, our sins remain. Those same words of commissioning were used when I received the laying hands by the bishop at my ordination to the priesthood. Declaring God's love and forgiveness is the essential mission of the Christian faith. It takes a very stubborn person to refuse to forgive. It is pointless to expend energy on retaining anger and resentment over an old hurt. If we have difficulty getting over an offense or injustice, imagine how difficult it is for God to bring all humanity into reconciliation. To bring all humanity together, God came to us in the person of Christ to be our advocate and mediator. The mission of the church is to be the heart, mind and hands of Christ to all people. Wherever we go and whatever we do is in Christ's name is by God's grace. Without that, we have no message, no power and no purpose.

When the risen Christ first appeared to the apostles, Thomas was not there. He was somewhere else. We don't know where he was. In the great drama of redemption, Thomas missed his cue. He is the patron saint of those who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Imagine his disappointment when he hears what happened. We can understand why he is cautious and skeptical. Who wouldn't be? Because he wasn't there to see for himself, he doesn't want to appear to be gullible. He has to wait eight days to come face to face with the risen Christ. Only then is he able to see for himself the marks in his hands and side. Only then can he exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" This is all the proof he needs. Jesus' response to Thomas is the same for us when we have our doubts, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

When we hear about an amazing event we may be skeptical because we don't want to appear to be naive. In times of doubt and uncertainty we seek proof beyond the testimony of others. What I admire about Thomas is his honesty in his doubting. He won't accept things on hearsay. He has to see for himself. Only when he is confronted with the evidence in the appearance of the risen Christ does he become steadfast in his conviction and belief.

As the English poet, Alfred Tennyson wrote:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

In Memoriam, Canto 96

Most of us want proof before we accept what is difficult to believe about God's ways. Human nature is just as challenging as trying to understand the mysterious nature of God. For instance, I don't understand why people make obviously wrong decisions in the face of all the evidence to the contrary.

I don't understand why two people get married when it is obvious that they incompatible and have little in common. I am perplexed why people ignore their health and refuse to follow the advice and warning of their physician.

Just as challenging is trying to understand the mysterious nature of God. I question many things I don't understand and accept on faith what I can't explain. We somehow conclude that if God is almighty, then only good things should happen to good people and bad things should only happen to bad people. The natural order of God's realm just isn't that neat and orderly.

As if that were not enough, religious personalities make distorted claims that give us reason to be cautious and skeptical. Drawing conclusions from scripture to justify discrimination on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation is wrong. Whether it has to do with the status of women, marriage, homosexuality or child discipline, passages in the Bible have to be studied in their context. I find it curious how people can become emotionally wrought over same sex relationships that are fulfilling while accepting adultery that injures relationships.

The German poet Rainer Rilke tells us that doubt can be a good companion on our journey to accept what we don't understand about faith. When working through the mysteries of life, honest doubt as a constant companion can lead to stronger belief.

Lifting obscure Bible verses out of context and applying them to contemporary issues can lead to erroneous, even dangerous conclusions. We must be cautious about drawing conclusions from what are believed to be predictions in the Bible and claiming that they are being fulfilled in our own time. It is not for a lack of faith that we can be candid about questioning certain passages in the Bible. I believe in the essentials of our Christian faith without having to believe that every word is literally true. Much of the truth is conveyed in the telling of the story, whether or not the story itself is literally true. Were it not for the faith of those who began their journey with questions and doubts, how else would Christianity have survived for over two thousand years? This is why Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."