

From doubt to belief

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 3, 2016.

But he said to them, '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.' John 20:25

The disciples meet together to come to grips with the incredible news that Jesus is alive. They meet behind locked doors for fear of the religious and civil authorities, trembling at the sound of footsteps or a knock on the door. The reference to their fear of the Jews has been used as the erroneous characterization of Jews as 'Christ killers.' In fact, it was the civil authorities encouraged by the crowd that resulted in Jesus being condemned to death.

To their relief and surprise, Jesus suddenly appears using the traditional eastern greeting: "Peace be to you." These are the same words we use in the exchange of peace in our worship today. The early Christian community under persecution developed signs in greeting each other that developed into the culture of Christian theology and worship.

An apostle is one who is sent out. The gospel narrative tells us that in commissioning the Apostles, Jesus drew on the power of the Spirit as he breathed on them. Air, wind, and breath have Hebrew and Greek origins in describing the nature of the God's Holy Spirit. In Genesis, we read how God breathed the breath of life into Adam to become a living soul. In Ezekiel, we read that God called upon the four winds to breathe life into the dry bones of the dead. The invoking of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost breathed life-giving power into the church to bring reconciliation to the world.

In conferring the power of the Holy Spirit on them, Jesus tells the disciples to declare God's forgiveness to all people. Knowing how difficult it is to reconcile just two people at enmity with each other, imagine what it takes to bring all humanity into reconciliation. At my ordination to the priesthood, the bishop prayed for the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim God's forgiveness. It is God to whom we confess and it is God who does the forgiving. I give assurance of God's forgiveness. Those who are repentant are forgiven while the sins of the unrepentant are retained.

The only one who wasn't there the day Christ appeared to the disciples was Thomas. We don't know where he was, but he missed out on the pivotal event of Christianity. When Thomas finally shows up, the disciples tell him what happened. Imagine his disappointment in being the only one to miss this extraordinary event. 'Doubting Thomas' is not only the patron saint of skeptics but also of those who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. We can understand his skepticism and caution. Who wouldn't? He doesn't want to take their word for it and risk being gullible. He has to wait eight days to have the opportunity to come face to face with the risen Christ. When he sees for himself the marks in his side and hands, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God! He has all the proof he needs. How wonderful it is for those who believe without the need for proof.

We like to think that we are not easily misled, but history has shown that many have been exploited in the name of religion with disastrous consequences. The travesty of religious wars and people burned at the stake for heresy has shown how power can be so easily exploited. Manipulation and coercion have no place in healthy religion. We have learned to be cautious and skeptical about being led astray. No one likes to be taken advantage of, but neither do we want to be cynical about religious faith.

Thomas is honest about his doubts and skepticism and makes no attempt to hide it. He won't accept the testimony of others. He has to see for himself. His honesty leads to a greater certainty than those who never question anything. Faced with the evidence, he is convinced.

If you find yourself questioning certain beliefs, it is a mistake to stay away from the church. Here is where we can bring our questions and skepticism. This is where we can think through the challenges of faith. By sharing what we believe as well as our doubts, we can come to a stronger faith. An old Polish proverb tells us that, to believe with certainty we must begin with doubting. The English poet Alfred Tennyson wrote in his *In Memoriam* these lines,

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

Canto 96

Would that each of us could arrive at such a strong conviction about faith as Thomas.

There is much that can't be explained. Sometimes the way people behave leaves me bewildered. There are those I like and respect whose behavior is sometimes hurtful. Because I know they are good people and are capable of better behavior I don't lose faith in them. I would only hope that others would do the same for me. There is much in this world that leaves me in awe, but I know that refusal to accept anything that can't be proven leaves no room for faith. I have learned to accept what I don't understand.

The German poet Rainer Rilke tells us that doubt can become a good quality if we train it. He wrote that honest doubt should not be a threat, but a friend to know and trust. Instead of being a spoiler, honest doubt can be the gateway toward thinking through the great mysteries of life that can lead to an even stronger conviction.

The church's mission is to be the heart, mind, and voice of Christ in carrying out the task of reconciliation. Whatever we say or do in God's name is through the power of the Holy Spirit acting in and through us. Perhaps the greatest proof of Christianity is the ongoing faith of those throughout the world for the past two thousand years. The church has survived many challenges of skepticism and doubt. Meeting these challenges head on has been a catalyst for an increasingly stronger and active faith. It is faith in our mission that goes toward making this a better world.