

What about “Doubting” Thomas?

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

2nd Sunday of Easter. April 3, 2005. 8:00 am service only. (Text: John 20:19-31)

Thomas – the hard-nosed realist – is frequently portrayed by preachers as typical of modern people: skeptical (maybe even a little bit cynical), stubborn, scientific, serious-minded, a very contemporary kind of person.

I wonder where he was on the day Jesus rose from the dead. How did Thomas happen to be the only one of the inner circle absent when the Lord first appeared to his fearful disciples as they trembled behind locked doors – afraid that their Master’s fate would soon be their own?

We *don’t* know why Thomas was missing. But we can see from the gospel record that Thomas was an independent thinker.

Mary Magdalene had seen the risen Jesus on Sunday morning. She told her story. Peter and James and John and the rest had all seen the risen Jesus that same Sunday evening – when Thomas had been absent. They told him their story. Did Thomas believe his friends? No. Thomas had to see for himself. No number of eyewitness reports from friends would convince Thomas. He had to see for himself. —And demanded not only to see, but also to touch. There were not going to be any tricks or illusions for Thomas.

Thomas was serious. If he was going to believe – really believe – and commit himself to a resurrected Jesus with the same intensity that he had committed himself to the flesh-and-blood Jesus of Nazareth who had called him from his trade to be a disciple, then Thomas would require truly convincing evidence. For him, that meant a first-person, eye-witness experience of his very own.

And so Jesus returned, on the Sunday following the Day of the Resurrection, and he showed himself to Thomas. He put that skeptic’s doubts to rest. Thomas was convinced. He saw. He believed. He worshiped.

How can Thomas teach a lesson to Third Millennium skeptics? We don’t anticipate any more post-resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ – at least not of the sort that we can tell contemporary skeptics to *expect*. So what can we say? I think the gospel permits us to say this: that the Lord in his love for us, in his gracious compassion for us, will provide whatever is needed to overcome the doubts of any serious seeker who truly *wants* to believe – no matter how skeptical that person might be.

Thomas loved Jesus, and he *wanted* to believe that his Master had been raised from the dead. He really *wanted* to believe that the grave could not hold him. But before he could believe, he needed to *have an experience* on which to ground his faith. He had loved Jesus too much and had been too committed as a disciple to accept anything less than an authentic meeting with the risen Lord. The gospel shows us that Jesus honored Thomas’ honest doubt and gave him the experience he needed in order to move from doubt to faith.

I say this to sincere seekers after truth: Doubt is not a bad thing. Asking hard questions is not a bad thing. But skeptical or questioning seekers – if they’re really looking for the Lord – are willing to be convinced. They’re *willing* to believe, *IF* given good grounds for that belief. There is a way of distinguishing between serious seekers and those people who just want to mock and belittle Christians. Serious seekers are willing to believe, willing to let faith change their lives – *if they have the personal experience they need*.

Jesus once healed the son of a man who said to him, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” *That’s where many people today find themselves. Such people are saying, in effect, “Lord, I do believe ...at least a little. Anyway, I want to believe. Please do something to help my unbelief.”*

If you are in that category, or if you know other people who are, I make this pledge to you: If you want to believe in Jesus, but need to have a personal experience to sustain your faith, God will give you the kind of experience you need. Just ask him. —But keep this in mind: *the faith-building experience you ultimately have may well turn out to be very different from the sort you originally demanded!*

It’s important for the modern seeker (and for us) that when Jesus showed himself to serious, disbelieving Thomas on that first Sunday after the Day of Resurrection, he did not do so on a lonely road where Thomas was sitting all alone... or in another place where Thomas might have been in solitude. We need to take notice that Jesus came to Thomas when Thomas was right in the middle of the group of disciples who had already seen the Risen Lord and believed in him. Thomas met the Lord when he was surrounded by believers.

I think this is where the serious, but questioning religious “seeker” is going to meet the living Christ today: *in the midst of a believing community of Christian people.* This raises for our church—and for every church—a painful but necessary question: do we as a community of Christians possess the kind of faith that provides the setting where a doubter might meet the risen Lord?

In the gospel accounts of Jesus’ appearances to the Ten Disciples on the evening of the first Easter and his appearance to the Ten plus Thomas exactly a week later, we notice one very special thing: Jesus was identified by the Ten and by Thomas *only* by the physical marks of his sacrificial death – the nail wounds in his hands and the spear wound in his side.

They had spent three years as his disciples, but they didn’t identify him by his familiar face or his hair color, or his height and weight. The Bible says that when he first appeared in the locked room and spoke to them, they were afraid. But when he showed them his hands and his side, they knew him, and they were glad. The signs of his having suffered were the assurance of his true identity.

This is the message that the Risen Lord has for the Church in our time. This is his word for those who believe in him and especially for a community of believers who would like to be able to help skeptics and doubters find faith. Jesus wants to say, *“He who has seen me has seen the Father. He who sees you must see me. And I am going to be identified only by the signs of self-sacrificing love.”*

One of the characteristics of Pope John Paul II that reporters commented on during the last few days of his life was that he didn’t try to hide his personal suffering or accommodate his own physical needs. Though he was crippled by Parkinson’s disease, he pushed himself to serve and give of himself to the limits of his capacity to the very end. His example touched a countless number of people.

A church that reveals Christ to the world is going to be a church that is willing to pay the price of self-sacrificing love. The church that reveals Christ to the world is going to be a church that has some wounds to show.

Our postmodern world is filled with “doubters” like Thomas who demand to see the Lord before they will believe that he is alive. They demand to have a personal experience of Christ before they will believe in him. And they know how to identify him, just as Thomas did. *They will recognize that Christ is really present when they can see his wounds* – the marks of his self-sacrifice. Nothing else is a sure sign of his identity.

The question left for us to answer is this: *Will they find him here?*