



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Redemption of Thomas

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

April 19, 2009
Second Sunday in Easter (Year B)
John 20:19-31

My friend Chris describes this Sunday after Easter as the resurrection day that really matters, because “it tells the resurrection story for the rest of us—for those who struggle with the audacity of faith, its incomprehensibility, and its foolishness.” (My thanks to Chris for his excellent reflections in an unpublished paper for *Lectio Jubilate’s* meeting in 2008. Following quotations are from that paper.)

Here’s how Chris describes us today: “We are the ones who skipped out of church (last Sunday), all of senses engaged and enlarged by this life-giving news of resurrection.... We left our sanctuaries having been ‘Eastered’ in every way. Our eyes, filled with white; nostrils teased with the scent of lilies; ears humming with the lingering chords of (our alleluias)...; arms given out with so much touching, shaking, hugging; our whole being, body, mind, and soul, aflame with Gospel, a cacophony of praise.”

But, then we all went home to a different story. Coming home from a full morning of celebration, we picked up the morning paper and heard a story running counter to our worship, and our whole beings were threatened with the deadliness of despair. The headlines from that paper sense have screamed at us, making us remember with too-graphic detail the life that had seemed so far away last Sunday morning when the organ pealed: “your daughter’s waywardness, the grief of death, the mounting bills, your aging parents—this life comes knocking again. And the thoughts come unbidden: What if it is all a charade? What if Dawkins is right and God is a delusion? What if Hitchens has nailed it and God is not great; in fact, God is not at all?”

I think Chris is right: This Second Sunday in Easter is the resurrection for the rest of us.

Many of you will remember the story that was in the news a lot several years ago—the story about the National Geographic’s “discovery” of a new gospel—The Gospel of Judas. In case you missed it, or don’t remember it, let me simply say that the Gospel of Judas tells a different story from the one you’re used to hearing about his role in Jesus’ betrayal. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the 4 gospels in our scriptures—all tell us that Judas was the betrayer—the one who handed Jesus over to those who wanted him killed. And Judas is never mentioned in a positive way.

The Gospel of Judas also tells of Judas’ betrayal, but it casts that betrayal in a different light. It suggests that Judas was simply acting in obedience to what Jesus had asked him to do. Who would have ever thought that Judas’ reputation could be cleaned up, redeemed?

While I have my suspicions about the Gospel of Judas, it did send my imagination off and running. Can’t you just see Thomas—sitting in a corner of heaven when he heard the news that the folks at National Geographic have taken up the cause of Judas? I can see

the marketing gurus lining up to offer Thomas their services—“Thomas, we can do for you what others are doing for Judas! We can totally remake your image. Just give us the word, and we’ll make it happen.”

Poor Thomas. Can’t you just imagine what it must be like to be one of the few disciples whose very name conjures up instant, concrete images? Simon Peter—impulsive. Judas—betrayers. Thomas—you know the word that goes there, don’t you? Doubter. Ask just about anyone to tell you what they know about the disciple named Thomas, and more likely than not you will hear the story of the day that Thomas doubted. If you look up Thomas (the Apostle) at Wikipedia, here’s what you’ll find: “Doubting Thomas is a term that is used to describe someone who refuses to believe something without direct, personal evidence; a skeptic.”

A number of years ago I was part of a preaching group that was discussing this story. The group was made up of a couple of Episcopal priests, a few Lutherans, a Mennonite, the priest and a lay educator from the Catholic Church, and a couple of Presbyterians. There was even an occasional Methodist sighting from time to time. It was a rich mix of voices and perspectives and you could always count on some vigorous discussion on just about any topic. Strangely, though, all of our traditions told the same story of Thomas. One of the preachers even sang a bit of a song he had been taught as a child growing up—a song that began “Don’t be a doubting Thomas....” The traditional interpretation of this story has been that Jesus scolded Thomas for his lack of belief, and we have been encouraging folks ever since not to doubt.

You’ve heard that refrain, haven’t you? Don’t be like Doubting Thomas. But then, as you grew and as you lived with your eyes open in the world, as you experienced one set-back after another, you slowly started to feel doubt creep into your mind and heart, and that caused you a whole bunch of grief because no one in the church around you ever seems to have any doubts at all about their faith and then you remember what you’ve heard about Thomas and you begin to worry that you have no faith at all. And then you start to get a little bit angry, because you think that if your doubts are forbidden by God or the church, then maybe you’re not welcome either.

But what if Thomas could be redeemed? What if we started to look at him not as the one who doubted, but as the one whose discipleship we can identify with, perhaps even admire?

You see, there’s more to the story of Thomas than you may remember. You may not remember from earlier in John’s Gospel when Jesus got word that his friend Lazarus had died and he finally goes back to Bethany to see him? The disciples try to get Jesus not to go, because they know that people are looking to kill him, and so they all plead with him to stay away. But not Thomas. He offers this word to his fellow disciples: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Or do you remember the time when Jesus was saying farewell to his disciples and started waxing poetic with one metaphor after another, saying that he was going to leave them but promising that God had many dwelling places for them and that they would join him there someday. And then Jesus said this to them, “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Do you remember who interrupts him at that point? It was Thomas who dared to question Jesus by asking, “We don’t know where you’re going. So how could we possibly know the way?” which gave Jesus the chance to offer an answer that we still cling to: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

And, if those two moments weren’t enough to redeem Thomas, then it’s high time that we reframed the story of what happened that first Easter evening when Thomas wasn’t in the room when Jesus showed up. All Thomas had to go on was the witness of some of his fellow disciples.

And don’t forget that these disciples are the same ones who had failed to believe the testimony of Mary Magdalene, who had come running to them with the news that she had seen the Risen Lord who had called her by name. They were slow to believe her witness and only believed when they saw Jesus. And John makes sure that we know that Jesus showed them his hands and his side—he showed them his wounds. In other words, the disciples’ belief came when they saw what Thomas wanted to see; only Thomas wasn’t there. And so all he has to go on is the witness of his fellow disciples.

What the tradition has failed to remember when we have thought about Thomas is that he is not unlike the other disciples at all. And, in focusing on Thomas, we have missed the larger news—Jesus gives him just what he needs to believe. By putting the spotlight on Thomas and his doubt, we perhaps fail to notice Jesus and his providing.

In my lifetime as a pastor I’ve met far more people like Thomas than any other disciple. I daresay that most of us—if we take God seriously—have had, or even now have, significant questions about our faith. We all struggle, at some point or another, to believe in a living, loving God. Our knowledge and understanding are, after all, limited and imperfect. And God knows this sinful and broken world can threaten to knock the faith right out of us.

Even someone as heroic in the faith as Mother Theresa struggled with doubt. Her letters reveal that she was plagued with questions and doubts for the last fifty years of her life. And yet, in spite of those doubts and questions, she kept on believing and serving in incredible ways—just like Thomas before her.

What I admire about Thomas is that he put his difficulty on the table for everyone to see. He was forthright and honest about his limits, “What you’re telling me is just too hard to swallow. I need some help before I believe.” And the good news is that Jesus, far from scolding him, offers to give him just what he needs to believe.

So how do we learn to see the Risen Lord in the midst of our world, and come to believe? It was that question that caused me to attempt something new several months ago when I would put Rachel to bed at night. We would do the various bedtime rituals that all parents do—brushing the teeth, reading the story, adjusting the covers, zooming them into position with the pillow. And then, before we would say our prayers together, I started asking her a new question. “Where did you see God today?”

I’ll never forget the first time I asked them that question. I could see the befuddled look on their faces, a look mixed with her fear that their father actually believed that you might be able to see God.

“Daddy,” they said, stating the obvious in their mind, “you can’t see God.”

It is that question that the church must answer day after day after day. People all around us are asking, “Where do you see God today?”

We look at nations at war; we see terrible natural disasters; we witness the birth of a child; we see the glory of a sunset; we see people sharing bread, and we see those with no bread to share. “Where do you see God?”

That is the continuing task of the church as we move from the empty tomb of Easter morning to the locked, fear-filled room of Easter evening to the houses and schools and offices and streets to which we will go today—to bear witness to the power of God at work in the world in the continuing presence of Jesus Christ. And somehow, by the mystery of God’s grace, God will take our meager words and our tentative actions spoken and done in the name of the Lord, and they will be just what somebody needs to believe.

And somewhere—in some distant corner of heaven—Thomas—believing, faithful, persistent, doubting Thomas—smiles.