

Doubters and skeptics

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2009.

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

Following the resurrection, the disciples are fearful and paranoid about persecution and meet behind locked doors. The sound of footsteps or a knock at the door means arrest with certain punishment and death. While they are gathered in seclusion, Jesus appears to them and empowers them with God's Holy Spirit. In commissioning the disciples the gospel tells us that Jesus "breathed on them."

Air, wind, and breath are images used to describe the nature of God's Holy Spirit, an invisible power whose effects we can 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 Ezekiel, we read that God calls upon the four winds to breathe life into the dry bones of the nation. At Pentecost, the invocation of the Holy Spirit as a mighty wind breathes life into the early Christian community to empower them to be the church as the living body of Christ in the world.

In giving them the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells his disciples that if they declare God's forgiveness, their sins are removed and if any are withheld, those sins remain. Those same words of commissioning were said over me as I knelt before my bishop to receive the laying hands at my ordination to the priesthood. Over the years I have known some very stubborn and stiff-necked people who refused to forgive because they were unwilling to let go of their anger and pride. I have seen people expend useless energy on retaining their anger and resentment for an unbelievably long time. Knowing how difficult it is for any two angry and stubborn people to be reconciled, imagine how difficult it is for God to bring all humanity into reconciliation with each other!

It is the responsibility of the church to convey the assurance of God's forgiveness and reconciliation. Whenever forgiveness is declared, it is God's grace at work. Those who are penitent are assured of God's forgiveness while those who are unwilling to forgive continue the burden of their sin. The church is referred to as the Body of Christ because we act as the heart, the mind, and hands of Christ wherever we are. Whatever we say or do in his name is done with grace and mercy. Without Christ, we have no message, no power and no purpose. It is only with Christ that his mission can be carried out.

The apostle Thomas was the only one who was not present when the risen Christ appeared to the other disciples on that first Easter. Because of this, Thomas is the patron saint of those who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shakespeare wrote in his play *As You Like It* that "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances..." which is why timing is essential to being on cue. We don't know where Thomas is when he misses out on the events of that great day. Imagine his disappointment when he hears about what happened. When the other disciples tell him about it, he is understandably cautious and skeptical. Who wouldn't? Because he hadn't been there to see for himself, he doesn't want to appear to be naïve and gullible. He has to wait eight more days to have the opportunity to come face to face with the risen Christ. Only when he is able to see for

himself the marks in Jesus' hands and side does Thomas exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" This is all the proof he needs. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Perhaps Thomas missed this most important event of his life because he was off by himself in his grief and fear. How sad when those who become discouraged, disappointed, fearful and questioning fall away from the church. It is especially in times of doubt and uncertainty that we need the support of the faith and fellowship of the church. The worst thing we can do in times of doubt and uncertainty is to isolate ourselves from the believing community.

What we can admire about Thomas is his honesty about his doubt and skepticism. He will not accept anything on hearsay. He has to see for himself. 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

When confronted with the evidence, Thomas is steadfast in his conviction and belief. Would that each of us could come to such conviction about faith! In my own life, I have questioned what I don't understand and have worked through to accept on faith those things that have no explanation. For instance, I will never understand why some people behave the way they do and it is useless to ask why. There are forces in God's natural world that leave me bewildered but I continue to question, learn and leave to faith what I don't understand.

With greater frequency, twisted and distorted views of religion are at the basis of much of the world's violence and conflict. Violence committed in the name of religion is a distortion of the true teachings of religion. Because of this, we are all the more cautious and skeptical about being led on by narcissistic personalities who make spiritual claims for themselves. No one likes to be cynical, especially about religious faith, but we also don't want to be gullible.

The German poet Rainer Rilke tells us that doubt can be a good companion on our journey to understanding. Honest doubt often leads to stronger belief. Doubt and skepticism are constant companions as we work through the great mysteries of life.

Rather than chipping away at our faith, asking probing questions and thinking critically can help us to become stronger believers and followers of Christ. How else would the church have survived all these two thousand years were it not for the support of those whose own faith began with doubts and skepticism?

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."