

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 11, 2010 (Easter 2, Year C)

We don't know where he was. We're not sure why Thomas wasn't with the rest of the disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Maybe he had a haircut appointment or a date. But whatever the reason for his poor timing, Thomas missed Jesus' post-resurrection appearance and had to rely on the eyewitness report of his friends.

It's hard to know whether Thomas felt left out or believed his friends were pulling the mother of all April Fools jokes. But his stubborn refusal to believe in the resurrection sight unseen has forever made him the poster boy of doubt. What Benedict Arnold is to treason; what Judas is to betrayal; Thomas is to doubt. Which isn't really fair, but we'll get to that.

On one level it's strange that we get this story of "Doubting" Thomas the week after Easter. We proclaimed the resurrection with great joy last week – to about 700 people I might add. The altar looked great and still does; we had stunning music with Alleluias ringing out all over the place; and we raised nearly \$9,000 for our outreach budget. And today we continue our celebration of the 50-day season of Easter with a baptism. Eliza Rose MacAlpine will be received into the household of God and before she is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit we will all renew our baptismal covenants – rearticulating the promises that mark the bedrock of the Christian faith.

So why would we allow doubt, in any form, to creep into this joyful Eastertide? You'd think doubt would have been banished along with sin and death and the grave. But it's not. It pokes its head into our Easter celebration as surely as a daffodil pokes through your garden in the early days of spring. Amid all of the Easter joy surrounding the resurrection Thomas shows up to say "Yeah, but what if it didn't really happen?"

Many of us have had similar thoughts at one time or another: What if none of this is true? What if we're all just wasting our time on Sunday mornings? What if the resurrection is a great farce? What if our faith is built upon a false premise?

But here's the truth about our faith: it's not kept in a hermetically sealed box or an underground vault; unable or unwilling to see the light of day. To truly be a living faith it must engage our emotions, our questions, and, yes, even our doubts. I find that God is often most present in doubt because it often leads to an even greater faith. But to stifle or suppress or ignore doubt leads to a faith plateau, one that never moves deeper. It's safer that way, of course – to keep our faith locked up in a place where doubts can't creep in and hard questions are not asked. But Jesus didn't die upon the cross in order that we might maintain our spiritual comfort level. He died and rose again in glory to break open our hearts and minds and souls; to engage us in a new relationship of love; and to draw us ever more deeply into that relationship. And that's not the stuff of spiritual stagnation; it's the stuff of spiritual splendor.

I had a friend in Baltimore who had an experience with a priest as a young adult that really turned him off to the church. As an intellectually and spiritually curious young man he sought to really engage the faith in which he was brought up. And he did so by asking lots of questions. At one point his priest looked at him and said, “Chris, stop asking so many questions” and from that point on refused to engage him in conversations about faith. And that pretty much shut the door on his experience with organized religion. Now, it wasn’t the Episcopal Church, although that doesn’t much matter. But it was at a time in his life when he was seeking deeper truths about life and faith. And the response effectively shut down his spiritual curiosity. He had tentatively entered the church, vulnerable and open to the moving of the Spirit. And he left disappointed and disillusioned.

“Stop asking so many questions.” Now this advice isn’t all bad. At times we do need to stop asking questions, leave our doubts aside, and just marvel at the wonder of God’s presence. But asking someone to blindly accept the faith is never helpful. And to me, the response sounds more like a priest who was simply annoyed and figured he had better things to do than answer a bunch of questions. But of course, as the story of Thomas demonstrates, it’s not how Jesus would have handled the situation. Jesus would have met my friend in the midst of his questions and doubts. He would have literally let him poke and prod all he wanted. He would have let him touch his wounds. Jesus would never say, “Stop asking so many questions.” For it is often through the doubts and questions we all have, that we meet the risen Christ. And Jesus knows this.

Thomas shows that there is room for doubt in our faith. That Jesus doesn’t banish us if we don’t walk the party line at all times. Faith can even transcend church doctrine; though this reality makes some of us clerical types a bit uncomfortable. It’s no accident that before Jesus leaves the disciples he breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit is our faith’s “X-factor.” It blows where it will; it cannot be contained. Like Jesus himself it can get into unexpected places; the Spirit can blow right through our hermetically sealed faith boxes and open us to new spiritual insights. The hope is that we will all have those moments of sheer belief where we’re able to proclaim with Thomas “My Lord and my God!” Even if there are periods of doubt in-between, Jesus stands with us patiently waiting for us to see the Truth.

So Thomas could use some better PR. The popular image of him focuses on the doubt but ignores his deep faith. And many of us can probably better identify with *his* spiritual journey than anyone else’s in Scripture. It’s probably too late to change his moniker from “Doubting” Thomas to something more positive. Like “Believing” Thomas or “Trusting” Thomas. We’ll have to get the Biblical spin doctors on this one.

As someone once put it, “seeing is believing, but believing is seeing.” To believe in all that we have seen and heard in these last days is to see the truth. And the truth is that despite our doubts and fears, Christ has risen, Christ is alive, and we share in the hope of his resurrection.