

ACTS 5:27-32
PSALM 118:14-29 or PSALM 150
REVELATION 1:4-8
JOHN 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter
April 24, 2022; Year C

Believing Doubters! Doubting Believers!

Believing Thomas! Now there is a phrase you have rarely if ever heard! And I seriously doubt you would hear this anywhere else on this Second Sunday of Easter often called “Low Sunday” because of the big letdown! We are not going to have one, by the way! Just what would our perspective be regarding this accused, condemned and convicted, tried in the court of public opinion, for all time disciple, if, big if, if he had been given the benefit of the doubt and labeled “Thomas, the believer,” “Believing Thomas?” Thomas had no chance, no opportunity to ever explain or exonerate himself whatsoever! What if he had been so honored, vetted and lauded for his commitment, given his props for his resolve to remain true blue, loyal to the end as a faithful follower of Jesus. Just what would we think? How would we now characterize this man? How would we portray our images of him in our preaching and teaching if we did not lead with our preconceived and predisposed negativity, bias assumed to be an accurate depiction of this special disciple? It is as if we are almost programmed to categorize and compartmentalize him in the traditional way history has unfairly persuaded us to do, guilty until proven guilty. After all, this is the one and same disciple, who upon discovering that Jesus was about to go and raise his good buddy Lazarus from the dead, calling his forth his friend from the tomb, a resurrection apparently witnessed by numerous individuals, unlike Jesus’ purported walk about from the tomb, Thomas boldly and bravely declared, with all the bravado his temerity could muster, “Let’s go, too—and die with Jesus!” Now that simply does not exactly

sound like someone who is full of questions, who is undecided, wavering and waffling in his faith, who is lacking assurance and showing any modicum of doubt about the veracity of his commitment to the cause and to the Christ. No, my friends, these are the marks of a faithfully focused individual, courageously flexing his nerves of steel, steeled for the impending journey, ready and willing to suffer a terrorizing and torturous martyr's death.

Supposedly, Thomas might even rival the apostle Paul in his evangelistic missionary pursuits, as legend has it that Thomas traveled as far as India in spreading the good news of the fledgling faith that came to be known as Christianity, journeying to the very place where presumably he was martyred for his faithfulness. It is fascinating reading! No, these are not the images associated with a cowardly unbeliever, these possible expeditions not at all sounding like the frail exercises of a timidly fragile flower, a wimp, a timidly and cowardly individual giving any number of legitimate reasons in opposition to putting his life on the line, cowering in his sandals. That line was too good to use just once! No, this sounds like someone fully committed, exuding confidence, even a might arrogant or cocky in his demeanor, a believer ready to go the distance, far beyond the extra mile even if that mile becomes a literal dead-end street. No, this sounds like someone whose belief quotient far outweighs his doubting equation if placed on some kind of balancing scales, an instrument designed to measure one's faithfulness. No, this is not someone teetering and tottering with indecision, equivocating in any way whatsoever, making any number of sincere and rational excuses, no qualifications, no ifs, ands, or buts. Yes, Thomas' faith was like a metronome, his allegiance in all respects appears to be tested, tried and true. He seems trustworthy until we get to today's Witness from the Gospels in John and this creative writer puts some doubts, some question marks, in our curious minds. Thomas makes one offhand, off the cuff, comment, a concern justifiably raised, and he is unfairly forever branded, yes, once and for all time, the

“doubting one.” And as they say, the rest is an unfortunate and unfair history. Today we revisit the story that sadly sealed one disciples’ fate in perpetuity, a legacy that quite frankly he has not earned and is just flat wrong. Thomas just does not deserve what he gets, this derogatory slander, billing him as a “doubter.” The crime, the sin, just does not meet the standard of proof. Yes, it is time to give Thomas a long overdue and much needed break. For the patron saint of doubters and believers, skeptics and cynics, everywhere, this sermon is for you and for those who timidly or proudly wear that honest and sincere mantle!

As with much of the Bible, the secret to unlocking at least some of the mysteries in this transparent and honest, exchange, this sincerest of conversations, between Jesus and Thomas is lost and found in the nuance of the text, perhaps better said, hidden but surely lurking between the lines. As per usual with the Bible, what we think we are reading and interpreting is not necessarily what we assume was literally transpiring between the rabbi and his randomly caught missing protégé. **Let’s quickly recall the story. Evidently, for some unnamed and unknown reason, Thomas was not with the other ten when Jesus appeared out of nowhere or thin air and stood among them, no doubt creating an emotionally charged, frightening and exhilarating, moment for a group that was now forced into hiding, playing a losing game of hide and seek with their Roman pursuers. Perhaps Thomas needed a potty break, or the group needed some snacks from the local 7-11 or some Chinese takeout, pizza delivery not a good idea, not a safe option, and so Thomas drew the short straw, forced to come out of his hideaway hole like February’s groundhog. The danger of being caught in public was palpable because the heat was white hot and getting hotter by the minute with this vagabond group now on the run and on the lamb as they huddled in their secret hideout, each one of them a wanted fugitive, no doubt both simultaneously loved and despised, even to the point of hatred, in their occupied Israeli territory. Wanted! Dead or alive?**

And of course, while Thomas was away Jesus came and went, offering some succinct words of wisdom that surely did not resonate with a band who were desperately on the run! (Paul McCartney and Wings reference). Thomas returns from his erstwhile errand, whatever his mandated mission was! No doubt he immediately noticed a more than subtle change in demeanor. Yes, there was suddenly a palpably radical shift in attitude, a veil lifted from the room, the tension briefly abating. His loyal brothers, the ten of them still stoically sitting and standing in a bewildered and amazed catatonic state, surprised if not shocked, the wonderment of it all, the thrill of this apparition beginning to sink deeply into their confused but comforted psyches, peace overcoming all those present. Thomas knew immediately that he had missed something significant, something substantive, something special. The others tell him as if describing paint drying or the sun rising, matter of fact, "We have seen the Lord!" Yes, no big deal! Everybody stay calm! Don't get excited! Happens every day! Nothing new to see here! It was just a matter of time! We knew he would be resurrected, restored to life, returned unharmed, unscathed, to us, renewing our broken and downtrodden spirits! Right! Thomas no doubt incensed, and rightfully so, justifiably angry, not a happy camper in the least! Come on guys, this is no time for jokes, no time to be kidding around here. We are dead men walking, all of us on death row! Cut it with the BS! No, no, Jesus was just here! You just missed him! He had things to do, people to see, places to go and so he could not tarry, he could not sit around for idle chit-chat and wait on you to get back! If only you had been here to see! Really! Seriously! With all the righteous indignation he could muster, Thomas demonstrably declares, "Unless! 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!" So there! Take that! Perhaps he would have been better suited as "pouting Thomas!" A little more accurate, me thinks! And then this part of the story comes to an abrupt and

painful end, a sudden stop before continuing, with no satisfactory resolution whatsoever. By the way, this is the only resurrection narrative that definitively declares that Jesus was nailed to the cross as opposed to being tied or strapped to it, a common practice designed to force the victim to linger as long as possible in a desperate struggle to breathe.

A week later the immobilized disciples were still hiding in place, waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop, obviously not yet inspired or spurred to action by Jesus' magical, miraculous, mythical, mysterious, manifestation in their midst. As fate or luck would have it, this time, however, Thomas happened to be with them when Jesus struck again. Once again, Jesus appeared like a ghost in the night, a haunting image suddenly and mysteriously manifest in their midst. And the one who sees and knows all immediately seeks out Thomas, the one not privy to the previous week's miraculous episode of visual proportions. Jesus extends a gracious gift if not annoyed invitation, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt—there is that troubling word for all time—but believe." The Johannine writer was a clever sort, never telling us if Thomas takes Jesus up on his offer. We are the guilty readers who quickly and routinely make that assumption. For all we really know, Jesus' simple invitation was evidently enough to more than compensate, this invite completely satisfying Thomas' curiosity, enough to convince, to convict, to convey, perhaps correct. The great Italian sculptor Andrea del Varricchio sometime during the 1400s created a bronze statuesque image called "Christ and St. Thomas." In the depiction of just the two of them the two figures gaze at one another, but no touching is in the offing. It is Jesus' gesture and the sight to behold that convinces this shaken disciple of all he needs to know! All Thomas wanted and, yes, demanded, was equal treatment, a level playing field, the same deference, the same respect, to get what everybody else got, nothing more, nothing less. Do we really

think the other former doubters would have expected anything less, anything different, had they been the unlucky odd man out, the poor sap caught momentarily out of the room and thus unawares? Yes, Thomas had the misfortune of being like the man who fell out of the balloon. He wasn't in it! Yes, the other ten got a free pass as if they were steadfast and staunch believers whose steady faithfulness was beyond reproach, never a doubt in their mind. Give me a break! The problem with interpretation then and leading to ours now is not the stereotypical presumption that Thomas doubted, a narrative that gets way too much air play, way too much emphasis, but it is rather that he believed! Eventually and inevitably, he believed! Is that not what matters and matters most? And he, not the rest of the disciples in their delusional deniability, ironically blesses us as he becomes our main guide and stay as we struggle with our own doubts, our own fears and anxieties, all the things that trouble us most, inhibiting our fragile belief and faith, limiting even our shakiest, insecure, ability to believe and exhibit any degree or level of faith, all those things alone or combined are things that regretfully can even serve to diminish our humanity, that has the power to debilitate us, to challenge or threaten our human capacity. Give the man a break! It is a break he deserves!

Seeing and believing is always a matter of trust, trust being essential, a core component foundational to any expression of faith no matter how minimal but however substantive it may be. What I would like to think is that Jesus was willing to give of himself in whatever way necessary to restore faith and to rebuild relationships, to renew the fragile disciples' deeply wounded egos and frail spirits. For example, when Mary Magdalene sees the risen Christ, she immediately seeks to embrace him, to give him a huge hug, to make what for her was a very much needed physical embrace. Jesus will have none of it! He will not allow it and refuses her advances, telling her not to hold on to him. I am convinced that this is indicative of his need for setting new boundaries,

for achieving a healthy detachment, for much needed separation, letting her know clearly that their relationship was now different, permanently altered, had radically changed, transformed, never to be the same again. No, things could not go back to the way they once were, the way they were before. Never again! And yet, Jesus invites Thomas to do the very thing Mary was forbidden, the one thing she could not be allowed in that tender moment or ever again. Yet Thomas is not only got to see as did his brothers, but to reach out and touch, privy to do whatever was necessary to be complete in their newly evolving relationship, to be made whole in his person. Interesting! Very interesting! Just what do these things mean? Perhaps we will never know!

Another interesting thing that also occurs in this Gospel attributed to the beloved disciple, John, is the way the narrative moves from belief and a desire for a deeper faith and shifts to a necessary understanding, perhaps the revelation, of the priority, the primacy, of giving and receiving love, a next step perhaps. In the next unfolding narrative, the question is put to Peter three times at the conclusion to the Johannine Gospel. It is not one seemingly concerned with belief or faith, but rather one of love. "Do you love me?" Peter responds three times, a sobering reminder of three times he failed to acknowledge who he was in relationship to Jesus, a cock crowing in the night, outing his denials. In this surreal ending, every time Jesus asks Peter this pivotal question and hears Simon the Rock's solid response, Jesus accentuates with an exclamation mark, "Feed my sheep!" Do something! Acts of love are just that, acts! Loving demands more than lip service, more than pious promises and hollow hyperboles, flattering adjectives, lofty language counting the many ways. Love demands more than mere belief, whatever it is that constitutes faith, our faith! Love demands whatever is called for in a given moment from one human in relation to another, always seeking to meet needs and make assurances, building relationships of both individual and communal bonds. Perhaps what the

Gospel writer was subtly saying was that, in the final analysis, love trumps belief and faith, love is ultimately more important, more essential. Wow!

Sometimes, my dear friends, having the belief we long to achieve, the faith we so desire to have, seems a daunting task, almost impossible, so very far beyond our grasp, our limited and mortal human capacity. We regret it even while we wish for it! We fear that our doubts and indecision will consume us, that our skepticism or even cynicism will get the better or the best of us. And yet we know that where there is no doubt, there can be no faith and where there is no faith there can be no doubt! The two are not at odds, not at war with one another, but are two sides of the same coin, working in concert, dancing with the divine and on occasion whenever necessary, dancing with that mythical non-existent being called the devil, all together in tandem to keep us balanced and buoyed as we struggle and strive to believe by faith. My favorite book from college was titled, *Religion and Doubt: Toward a Faith of Your Own*. I do not remember the content, but the title still manages to always move me and comfort me, giving me hope and assurance about all my questions that seemed to go unanswered and still does to this day. And there always seems to be far more questions than answers when we consider matters of a faithful heart, and mind, all things theological. Yes, Thomas is our guide, our mentor, a worthy role model, and for many of us whose doubt is palpable, a constant companion, he is our patron saint.

I love how the Gospel of John ends. It does not end with a call to belief and faith, but a call to love, a call to action. Perhaps the unofficial chapter arrangement in the Gospel called John was the writer's way of reminding us that if and when we cannot believe, when we fail to meet the measure, the standard of our own faithful expectations, that we can still love, that we can continue to serve the one we follow, the very human of history, Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, we

can keep on loving, keep on doing, giving cups of cold water, feeding, quenching, clothing, visiting, and every other act of random kindness that the Gospels call forth from us, yes, demanding by everyone who desires to follow Jesus. When belief or faith fails, love does not! So says the apostle Paul in not so many words. Yes, we can follow the ways, embracing the mission and ministry of Jesus, whether we believe or have faith! Or not! Yes, even a pagan, a non-believer, or non-faith practitioner can do good things! Do not be fooled into thinking otherwise! Matthew 25 reminds us that we are judged according to our activity, not our faithfulness, not our ability to believe. Yes, it is in the Bible! The Bible tells me so! The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it! **Conversion by getting saved is nowhere on the radar, an implied if not explicit irrelevance. Conversion does no earthly good for anyone “save” the one having the unique conversion experience. All humanity can and should be about the work of social justice, no matter! All of us can be gospel activist no matter one’s belief, no matter what or where or in whom they place their faith. Yes, it is what it is, and it should offer at least a modicum of comfort as we face our own tests and trials, all our painful experiences exacerbated when belief and faith by circumstance seem sorely lacking, when faithfulness is the furthest thing from our finite minds. Belief is hard! Faith is hard! Doing good should not be! So, keep on counting on grace! Keep on doubting, keep on believing, keep on “faithing!” Let’s not fool or kid ourselves! If we are honest with ourselves, we know that all of us, on our best and our worst days and every day in between, that all of us are “Doubting believers,” and “believing doubters” and yet, even so, we are graced, blessed beyond degree! Thanks be to God!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and loves us when we doubt and loves us when we believe, and whether are not we have even the faith of a mustard seed! Amen and amen!

