

BEACHBURG PASTORAL CHARGE

United Church of Canada

April 29th, 2020 Easter 2

Well we all thought that we would be back for Easter, but Easter has come and gone and we still find ourselves in isolation, hoping that this will soon come to an end, but no matter how or when we come together:

In believing, in doubting, we now commune at this time, and God accepts us.

In wondering, in assurance, we commune at this time, and God welcomes us.

As individuals, as a faith community, we commune at this time and God's Word speaks to us.

With rejoicing, with sorrow, we commune at this time, and the risen Christ is eternal hope for us, as we worship and as we live. Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, on this second week of Easter, the light of your love continues to shine on!

Your light has come into the world, And neither darkness, nor evil, nor even death itself could overcome it.

And we (like the disciples, like Mary, like "doubting" Thomas) who had been there with you through Holy Week and the first Easter Morning we continue to be witnesses to the resurrection story: wondering, bewildered, hoping, rejoicing....and sometimes doubting. Loving Christ, Open our minds and hearts to receive you, O Lord: your resurrection glory, your light everlasting.

May this time of worship, reflection and celebration be a worthy response to your love and your sacrifice for us.
We pray in your Holy name. Amen

Song -We now have a special performance from two people that I deeply admire who are part of our congregation in Foresters Falls David and Daniella Bell who will be performing Let It Be. Please enjoy.

Scripture John 20:19-28

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Jesus Appears to Thomas

²⁴Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Honest Thomas John 20: 19-28

If I were to mention the names of certain disciples to you and ask you to write down the first word that comes to mind, it's

unlikely that every one of you listening today would come up with the same words. But if I were to mention the name of Judas, most of you would write down the word 'betray'. If I were to mention Simon Peter, some, but not all, might write the word 'faith' or 'rock'.

If I were to mention the names of James and John, some of you, especially those who are up on their biblical knowledge, would write the phrase 'Sons of Thunder' as Jesus nick names the in the book of Mark chapter 3 verse 17. But if I were to mention Thomas, there is little doubt what word most everyone would come up with—the word 'doubt'. Indeed, so closely have we come to connect Thomas with doubt, that we have coined the phrase "Doubting Thomas" to describe the state of unbelief.

You may be interested to know that in the first three Gospels, we are told absolutely nothing about Thomas. It is only in John's Gospel that Thomas emerges as a distinct personality. But even then there are only 155 words about him. There is not a lot about this disciple anywhere in the Bible. But even so, there is more than one description of him.

When Jesus turned His face toward Jerusalem, the disciples thought that it would be certain death for them all. Surprisingly, it was Thomas who said in John 11:16, "Let us also go, that we may die with him". It was a courageous statement, yet we don't remember him for that.

We also tend to overlook that in this story of Thomas' doubt, we have the one place in all the Gospels where the confession, "My Lord, and my God" (John 20: 28, *RSV*), is made. It's the only place where Jesus is called 'God' without qualification of any kind. You are "my Lord and my God!" These are certainly not the words of a doubter.

Now, one of the most interesting things to be considered about Thomas arises, not from the Gospels themselves, but from details of the very early history of the Church.

In the beginning, the Gospel writers were part of the Jewish community. Within the 'Jesus' movement at that time, there were different factions, each faction attaching itself to a different, prominent disciple.

One faction followed the disciple, John. About sixty years after the death of Jesus, the followers of John wrote the Gospel of John, in which their hero comes off looking wise and heroic. By contrast, another faction, the adherents of the disciple, Thomas, wrote the Gospel of Thomas, in which the portrayal of Thomas was, of course, very favouring of him.

Unfortunately, the Gospel of Thomas didn't make the final cut, when the Church decided in the middle of the third century, which books would form the canon of the Bible. Despite its exclusion the Gospel of Thomas was nonetheless very popular and widely circulated in the early Church.

By the way if you are interested, the religious scholar, Hal Taussig, published a book in 2013 entitled “A new New Testament”, which includes the Gospel of Thomas, and a number of other (non canonical) Gospels, that is Gospel books that did not make it into what we recognize as our authorized version of the NT. Taussig says that he doesn’t believe our (canonical) New Testament is incomplete, but that the (non canonical) material he has added “illuminates and expands on it.”

So our Gospel reading this morning is from John’s Gospel only because that is the Gospel that was included in the Bible. Our portrayal of Thomas is therefore the Thomas of John’s Gospel, where Thomas is cast in a poor light, as a man of little faith, a ‘doubting Thomas’.

John’s cynicism has, on this account, become so well known, that his name is now synonymous with distrust and faithlessness. When I consulted a thesaurus for synonyms for the word ‘doubt’, the phrase ‘doubting Thomas’ appeared. You know your reputation is well established when your name appears in a thesaurus.

Unfortunately for many people, the reference ‘doubting Thomas’ is all they know about Thomas. In truth, a more accurate description of him might be ‘Honest Thomas’.

So let’s ask ourselves what we can learn from looking a little closer at Thomas?

1. First, Jesus did not blame Thomas for doubting. So often in the past, the Church has handled doubt by linking it with disbelief, suppressing it with inquisition, torture, and burning at the stake. But Jesus never condemned Thomas.

I must admit that I am a bit leery of people who say they've never had any doubts. People who always seem so certain and sure of themselves, scare me. Extremism is not far removed from such dogmatic faith.

For me, authentic faith always begins with intellectual honesty. And doubt is the bedrock of honesty. Put it another way: Faith is not the absence of doubt; it is the overcoming of doubt.

I've had doubts. I've stood by the graveside and heard the cries of family members who have lost someone closer than life itself. And I've thought to myself: Is the resurrection story reality? Or Is it all simply ancient myth designed to get us through the night?

But then I am reminded of what Alfred Lloyd Tennyson once said: "There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds." So we find ourselves crying out, like the father of the possessed child in Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9: 24, NKJV)

2. Secondly, we can learn from Thomas's experience that the most endearing things in life can never be proven. Jesus said: "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20: 29, NKJV) I don't know how that makes you feel, but it is of great comfort to me. Jesus is talking about me. I will never see Jesus in this life. I will not have the chance to put my finger in the print of the nails. It will never be proven to me that He was raised from the dead. Jesus understands it's harder for me to believe than for Thomas, and he counts me blessed.

For how can you conclusively prove any of the realities live such as love, friendship, or faith? How can you establish with verifiable evidence that love exists beyond a shadow of a doubt? The cynic can always dismiss our acts of love toward others as in reality acts of self-love, or exercises in controlling people. How can you prove your love or faith in anything, to anyone?

What we must understand is that we're better off leaving some room in our worldview, for the poets and mystics, and the wise sages of the ages.

Doing so doesn't preclude science. Nor does it preclude reason. What it does mean is that the most important things in life can never be conclusively proven. You need, moment by moment, to live by faith.

3. And so, we learn from the example of Thomas a third lesson: We need to be honest in our faith and not just repeat things that others say without experiencing it ourselves. You probably have guessed by now that I admire Thomas. I admire anyone who, in

the midst of great pressure to conform, to play the game, to go along, refuses to say something he isn't sure is true. I don't think Thomas was a doubter. I think Thomas was an honest man. Honest Thomas. And I think Jesus honoured his integrity by returning to his disciples once again, this time when Thomas was present, and letting Thomas touch his wounds.

Now Thomas was honest, but that didn't mean he was unreasonably stubborn. He wasn't worried about saving face. He wasn't concerned that someone might say, "I told you so." He wasn't bent on making his point no matter what. When he was presented with the evidence, he changed his mind. "My Lord and my God," he said. And he believed.

There will be times when people will demand that you make statements about God, say this thing or that thing about Him, believe this thing or that thing. But it will be something you've not yet experienced. They will want you to testify of something you've not seen, heard, or known. The shadow of doubt, the flicker of hesitation, will cross your face, and they will pounce, wanting you to believe as fervently as they. "I thought you were a Christian?" "Don't you believe in God?" "I thought you believed in the power of prayer?" "Don't you believe in miracles?"

When that happens, remember honest Thomas. Remember the importance of spiritual integrity. Remember that God never expects us to violate our conscience.

Remember that Jesus visited Thomas not to reprimand him for his faithlessness, but to honour his integrity by letting him see for himself what others had seen.

For our highest obligation to God and to ourselves is not to copy or just pay lip service to what others have said about God, but to speak truthfully and share honestly what we ourselves have seen and known. When I was in University at the start of each class our professor would ask each one of us the question “What has God done in your life today?” And that may be a good way for us to end our day and for me to end this sermon. “What has God done in your life today?”

Blessed, indeed, are those who have not seen and yet believe. Thanks be to God.

Prayer

Pastoral Prayer (inspired by John 20:19-31)

Risen Christ, eternal Savior, Like the disciples, we are gathered together in Spirit in this week after Easter: wondering whether it is true, marveling at the possibility, and daring to hope.

Like the disciples, we are sometimes afraid, sometimes full of doubt.

But in your extravagant generosity, your boundless love, you appear to us in our fear and love us in our doubts and grant us the oceans of your peace.

Thank you for loving us as we are.

Teach us not to hide from our doubt,
but to recognize it as a door to mystery and to deeper faith.
After all, the disciples' fear became a visitation
as they saw you among them, risen and triumphant.
Thomas' doubt became a moment of revelation
as he saw and touched you, and finally believed.

This morning we pray for the many men and women in our society
who have no faith at all especially in these trying times. There are so many
who live without hope,
without knowledge of your resurrection, without your light in their lives.
Grant us the courage to live as witnesses to your resurrection and to be
Your light in our world.

We pray for those with us this morning
For it is your presence, Loving Christ,
that removes all fear and erases all doubts:
come, and grant us your presence & peace.

Come to us whenever we are afraid
Whenever we are grieving, whenever we are totally fed up with our current
circumstances at this time.
Come to us now as we pray in silence
For those we care for and are worried about...
Despite the strong and solid doors we lock
To protect ourselves
To shut out the world
Come to us with words of peace.
And living Lord Christ, grant to all of us,
renewed faith, great courage, and your boundless peace in the words that
you have taught us to pray saying. Amen

Benediction: Go Forth

Go forth in joy. You have God's kingdom in your heart.
Go forth in love. Live for the Lord.
Go with hope and forgiveness for the grace of God sustains.
Go forth in peace. Go forth in light. Now and forever. Amen
Please enjoy our closing song which is entitled Doubting Thomas
by Nickel Creek and have a blessed week.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3c_8hYK0eo