

Sermon Preached on
Second Sunday of Easter
(April 3, 2016)
"Witness to Faith and Doubt"

Doubt. It's nothing to be ashamed of. But, it's nothing to be proud of, either.

It just is. I say this because the story of Doubting Thomas is both popular and, I think, often misapplied.

Let's review. The disciples - except for Thomas - are gathered together on Sunday evening after the crucifixion. Mary has told them this crazy story about Jesus being alive, but John's gospel doesn't indicate whether or not they believe her. (In Luke and Mark, they think the women are telling tales). Then, of course, Jesus appears to them and grants them the Holy Spirit. Of course, when Thomas returns, he doesn't believe it. It's only a full eight days later (that would be tomorrow if you're keeping track), that Jesus appears again. He tells Thomas to touch him, and only then does Thomas believe. Jesus gives him a gentle rebuke and says blessed are those who believe without seeing.

Now, before we dump on Thomas, let's remember that someone doubts in all of the gospels, and in them it's all - or at least some of the disciples - who doubt.

The point isn't that Thomas was the doubter but that doubt was a natural response. There's no shame for doubters. And yet, while doubt may be understandable, it's not a place we really want to stay in. This may be where we sometimes make a mistake, using doubt to prove that we are thinking Christians who don't just blindly believe. And it's true - blind belief is not real faith, and doubt is a natural part of the process.

BUT - Jesus wants the disciples to have faith because it's only then that they - and we by extension - are able to accomplish great things for the Kingdom of God. According to the various gospels, those great things include forgiving sins, baptizing, and spreading the word that God loves all His children.

The reading from Acts underscores the great things we can do in faith. The disciples in this passage, boldly proclaim the Gospel even in the face of certain punishment. Yet Peter is able to say, "We have to obey God above human authority - and God calls us to proclaim the forgiveness that comes from Christ."

Notice that the great things we're called to do center around forgiveness? We call that reconciliation. It is the core of our belief because our entire faith is based on God's love - and love without forgiveness is empty. Love without reconciliation is not love. It takes a lot of faith to love like that.

So doubt, while understandable, is not where we want to stay because it would get in the way of doing the work we're here to do.

But why is this passage so important? Why do all of the gospels address the doubt of the disciples?

Remember that the gospels were written many years after the resurrection. The gospel writers know that, after Jesus ascends, people are not going to see him in person anymore. As much as we would like, that's not going to happen. And really, could you imagine what it would be like if Jesus did stick around physically forever so that we could see him now? He'd never get to go home - and we'd never get to work. We would just want to hang out with him and not do the work we are really here for which is to spread God's love with our lives.

Seriously, Jesus knows that the Good News isn't all about him being raised. His resurrection was, after all, merely a sign. (A big one, I'll grant you, but a sign nonetheless). It's a sign of God's love for us and God's call for us to love each other. It is simply not practical or desirable for Jesus to stay here physically. But that necessarily means that we will never see him in person and we have to preach him to people who will never see him.

If we are to preach God's love and reconciliation, we have to get beyond the physical presence of Christ. Ultimately, no matter how many people saw the risen Jesus, if our faith is based solely on seeing, then it is missing the point of why Jesus died and rose in the first place.

Which of course is that God loves us and wants us to live in love.

This passage was written for us - for all the generations to come after the disciples. They knew that doubt would be a natural part of our journeys. But they also knew that faith - trusting Jesus without seeing - is the way forward. Amen.