

Easter 2, 4.19.2020

St. Mark's, Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9 John 20:19-31

“The Gift of Faith”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.* Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship on this second Sunday of Easter! During the Easter season we celebrate and give thanks for the gift of faith. It is through the gift of faith that we experience the Easter reality of Christ Jesus alive for us each and everyday.

At some point in our lives all of us have probably exclaimed, “I don’t believe it!” Or “I don’t believe it for a second.” Or “I don’t believe that at all, that can’t be right.” At one time or another, all of us have probably been on friendly terms with disbelief and doubt. This is actually a good thing, because doubt helps us understand Thomas’ point of view in today’s gospel.

Today’s gospel of Thomas’ encounter with the risen Christ is one of my favorite passages in the Bible, because I can see myself in this story - and perhaps you can, as well. I have often thought that Thomas has been treated somewhat unfairly in this story. All of us know the phrase “doubting Thomas,” and perhaps we have even used it. Jesus appeared to his disciples on the evening of Easter Day, when Thomas wasn’t with them. After hearing their testimony, Thomas’ doubts are very understandable. Thomas had real questions about the veracity of his friends’ testimony that they had met the risen Jesus. Thomas said, *“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.”*

Thomas’ reservations are very understandable. Thomas wanted to verify for himself the truth of the disciples’ testimony. The marvelous thing about this story is that Jesus appeared again to the disciples and to Thomas, who were still in isolation behind locked doors.

It was a week after Easter, today if you will, and Jesus came and stood among the disciples, this time including Thomas. Jesus said, *“Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”*

The remarkable thing about the resurrection accounts of Jesus is that Jesus appeared among his followers. The disciples did not need to go and look for Jesus; rather, Jesus came to them in their isolation and doubt. They were “sheltering in place” – so to speak - behind locked doors, and the risen Christ came to them.

There is something to learn here: it is Christ who continues to come to us where we are, whether it is in sickness, stay at home orders, quarantine, or in isolations of our own making. Christ comes

to us, saying “Peace be with you.” This is the very real and present meaning of Easter. The risen Christ comes to us - every day. Do we anticipate the presence of Christ? Do we look for Christ alive in our very midst? Christ will be among us. Christ is here now. This is the first thing about Easter that we notice: Jesus comes to those who are afraid and locked away. Jesus stands among those with questions and doubts.

Jesus’ words to Thomas also give us a hint about something profound about to happen: “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*” In these words to Thomas, Jesus promises the gift of faith to others. Jesus tells Thomas, and us, us that the gift of faith will be a blessing to those after Thomas.

As modern people, we may think that we have surpassed the people of antiquity, and in many areas of life we have. As modern people we may also think that our calm and dispassionate powers of rationalism are what make us modern. Yet in today’s story, we are confronted with a man named Thomas who also expressed doubt and demanded evidence to help him understand. There is nothing exclusively modern about doubt and the demand for evidence. People in antiquity could obviously also think and reason.

What Jesus opens up for Thomas, and for us, is that belief is another way of knowing and verifying reality. Jesus’ message to Thomas, and to us, is that along with reason, faith is another way of knowing. This point is made clear in the words of Peter today, “*Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*” Peter’s insight is remarkable. “*Although you have not seen him, you love him*” – although you have not seen Christ Jesus, you know him. You know him through faith. Faith is another way of knowing.

As modern people, we need to overcome the unproductive idea that faith and reason are opposed to one another. Faith and reason are not opposed to one another; faith and reason are simply two different, but complimentary, ways of knowing. Faith and reason are both necessary for humanity to be fully human. Faith and reason are what make us human and distinguish us from everything else in the natural world.

Jesus’ words to Thomas, and Peter’s words about faith are meant to help us know the reality of the risen Christ Jesus, as well as the inner reality of ourselves. Faith and reason - the heart and the mind - are related to one another and should be in dialogue within us all of the time. When Peter

says, “*You have not seen him, but you love him,*” Peter is talking about a way of knowing God through faith. Our rational faculty is incomplete without belief, because faith and reason compliment one another and complete us as individuals.

All of us probably have a book or two that have shared a profound insight with us, helping us to grow. Some years ago I encountered a book titled *Personal Knowledge*, by a British philosopher of science named Michael Polanyi. Polanyi was a scientist who taught at the University of Manchester after the Second World War. Polanyi worked in the area of human knowledge attempting to answer the question, “How do we know what we know?” For Polanyi, faith is another way of knowing. Polanyi argued that human beings believe more than we can ever prove, and that we know more than we will ever be able to say or articulate. In other words, we have a world inside of us beyond speech and beyond empirical proof. None of us doubt the reality of this inner, emotional, rational, and spiritual world within us. In today’s readings Jesus and Peter are describing this inner world.

Peter says it all when he writes, “*Although you have not seen him, you love him.*” Peter is witnessing to the Easter reality of faith. We come to know and love Christ Jesus through the gift of faith. The fourth century theologian, St. Augustine wrote, “Unless you believe, you cannot understand” (*nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*). Believing is the way through which we know and understand Christ. Faith restores balance to our cognitive and rational powers by opening our inner life, helping us thrive as human beings. Faith allows God into our thinking and into our rational decisions. Faith allows human beings to frame their questions and answers to the challenges we face. Faith helps us make sense of an often senseless world. Faith helps us overcome our own physical limits as we work with others toward expressing God’s love and justice in making human systems more equitable in our world. Faith allows us to surpass the limits of our mortality and aspire to God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. “*Although you have not seen him, you love him.*” Faith is another way of knowing the power and presence of a loving God. Faith helps us give meaning to life and shape to our world.

The next time you say “I don’t believe it!” pause for a second and ask yourself, how might faith bring into being possibility and transformation? How might Christ already be present in my questions and doubts? O Lord, come to me where I am in my doubts; through faith, open me to new possibilities and connections. O Lord, grant me faith that makes me whole to live for others. Amen.