

Easter 2

Conditional Faith, Unconditional Love

John 20:19-31

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on April 19, 2009*

Over thirty years ago I was ordained on the second Sunday of Easter and then, as now, the story of Thomas was the gospel reading. I found comfort in that story then, or at least I felt it fit, because ordination for me did not imply that I was approaching sainthood or ever would for that matter, but despite my shortcomings and doubts, I believed that God called me to a special form of service in the church. That service is not to be a religious version of the “Shell Answer Man”, but to wrestle with God—to share my search to be human and faithful in the midst of God’s people while seeking to be as loving as Jesus

Thinking back on my ordination I remember one bit of gallows humor shared with me by a colleague. He described ordination as the service in which one kneels before the bishop who lays hands upon your head—and then—quickly extracts your spine. Since psychological profiles of ministers tend to show that we are, on the whole, people who place a high value on being liked and pleasing others, I must admit to a certain identification with this account. I know all too well the temptation to avoid unpleasant subjects that might cause conflict. Yet I loathe the idea of being a Casper Milquetoast, or the implication that the church is an institution that will go to great lengths to maintain peace at any price.

Over the years Thomas has gotten a bad rap in church circles; his name being made synonymous with doubt. However, since my ordination this story of Thomas continues to teach me new things. The picture of Thomas in the New Testament is found primarily in the gospel of John. Looking at John’s portrayal, I believe Thomas is better described as a “realist” rather than a doubter. When Jesus told his disciples of his decision to visit his dying friend, Lazarus, even though to do so would be dangerous, Thomas expressed his unswerving loyalty to Jesus. It was Thomas who said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” Those of us who are tempted to sit in smug judgment on Thomas might do well to be so endowed with his loyalty and willingness to risk himself for his Master.

On the other hand, to Thomas, the realist, the way of the cross from which Jesus did not shrink, could only be a path to destruction. Despite hearing from his friends that they had seen the Risen Jesus, Thomas’ realism led him to state conditions necessary to be fulfilled for him to believe.

I will not believe, said Thomas, UNLESS I SEE THE MARK OF THE NAILS ON HIS HANDS, UNLESS I PUT MY FINGER INTO THE PLACE WHERE THE NAILS WERE, AND MY HANDS INTO HIS SIDE, I WILL NOT BELIEVE IT.

And I can imagine what led him to state those conditions. I can imagine him saying, “I will not accept this man as my Lord, unless I see the marks of death upon him. My Lord went through death, and no one passes through death untouched, unmarked.

My Lord was one who walked with the hurt and the suffering. He entered into their pain and he bore their pain. My Lord wept for Lazarus. Tired and thirsty he shared the burdens of a Samaritan woman. He mixed with the poor and the sick. My Lord was bruised and hurt. His face was drawn. Tears had already marked his face and the marks of death, the deaths of others, were already on his body before he went to the cross.

And my Lord did go to the cross. I saw the nails go into his hands and feet. I saw the spear pierce his side and I saw his pain and fear. He will not be my Lord unless I see those marks now, unless I know he is the same Lord I loved before.”

Richard Carlson, New Testament professor at the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg, PA, gives a new slant to the story of Thomas, writing, “From the start, it is important to realize the story is not about Thomas. Rather, the story is about varied responses to the reality of the resurrection. Thomas’ response (though quite vivid) is but one in an assortment of responses to the resurrection presented in John 20.” Mary Magdalene initial response when she arrived at the tomb was one of consternation, assuming that an empty tomb could only mean that someone had moved Jesus’ corpse. Peter’s response was ambiguous; he saw the empty tomb and burial cloths, but came to no definitive conclusion. The Beloved Disciple, who reached the tomb ahead of Peter, saw and believed. Later, when she encountered Jesus who she mistakenly assumed was the gardener, Mary Magdalene responded in faith and told the disciples that Jesus is Risen.

In contrast to the way most of us have thought of Thomas, his response is not one of doubt, but rather a statement of definite and emphatic conditions that must be fulfilled in order for him to believe. How often do we approach our faith relationship with Christ as a legal contract in which we seek to establish the terms by which we will respond with faith? If I can find a new job...if this marriage can be saved...if the medical test comes back negative ...if I see justice done...if the river doesn’t flood its banks...if the market rebounds..., then I will believe! We replicate the disbelief of “conditional” Thomas each time we establish for Christ how Christ needs to operate in our lives and each time we ground our faith in what we demand from God, rather than trusting in what God does in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

Given Thomas’ conditions, and ours, we do well to pay attention to Jesus’ response. Jesus did not leave Thomas in despair. Mysteriously, a week after the Resurrection, he appeared once more. Approaching Thomas, he does not chastise, but commands him to touch his wounds. On first glance, it appears that Jesus works faith in Thomas by meeting his conditions. On the other hand, despite countless artists’ depictions, Thomas never physically examines or inspects Jesus’ wounds as he claimed he needed to do before he would believe. Instead, in the coming of Jesus to him whose conditions for believing had blinded him to the possibility of new life, Thomas received more than he ever believed possible. He saw in the risen Christ that life had overcome death, the powers of darkness are incapable of extinguishing the light of Christ’s love. Then Jesus gave Thomas one more command, “Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” In other words, he both commanded and empowered Thomas to live as one who knew unconditionally, despite all threats to the contrary, that life, not death, is the final

word for us and all creation. It falls to Thomas then to make the great confession that is found nowhere else In Scripture, Jesus, the Risen Christ, is “My Lord and my *God!*”

There is a wonderful story recorded in Mark’s gospel about a man who sought to have a demon cast out of his son. The disciples attempted to cast it out, but failed. The man then implored Jesus, “If you are able, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus responded by saying “All things can be done for him who believes” to which the father gave the following response with which I suppose we all can identify, “I believe: help my unbelief!”

God knows we each have many factors that tempt us to live by “unbelief”. Who can look at this world and the countless threats to its survival, threats of violence, environmental disaster, pandemics, and poverty, and not be tempted to “be disbelieving”? Who can lose a spouse or loved one and not ask, “How can I go on?” Who has not felt outrage at injustice, but felt too insecure to speak out? Who among us has not questioned the integrity of his or her own faith when we cling stubbornly to pride or resentment, rather than risking being known as we are, in need of acceptance and forgiveness?

If we are honest, we must all confess that we spend much of our lives in a state of disbelief in which we subtly and not so subtly give God our “conditions” for belief. Living in this way we are like the disciples who gathered behind closed doors, unable to live in the freedom of the resurrection. We doubt God’s promise to love us as we are. And we doubt God’s ability to use us, with our doubts, as instruments of His peace in a broken world. But it is precisely to people who live on the continuum between belief and unbelief that the Risen Christ still comes, just as he came to Thomas with his conditional faith. He knows us just as we are—with our particular gifts, fears, belief, and unbelief—and offers us forgiveness and his assurance that life is victorious over death.

The good news is that Christ is not content to leave us behind the closed doors of our disbelief. He seeks us out wherever we may be and asks us to put the good news of the resurrection to the test by following him in mending this broken, yet glorious world; living as people who know by faith that love is the only means to overcome fear and disbelief. “Believing”, for us, does not mean that we have “the answers” for all the ills of this world. It simply means trusting that the result of risks taken in faith is that we will meet Jesus himself and experience the power of life in his presence.