

The Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020, the Rev. Karen Swanson
Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Faith and doubt are explored in today's Scripture lessons. For many of us, both are part of our spiritual lives. In Scripture, faith in God has two elements. One element is about trusting in God. To have faith in this sense is to be willing to put oneself in God's hands. It is akin to a child who is willing to follow the lead of his parents, because he feels safe and secure in their presence. The other element of faith is to believe key assertions about God, for example, that God is good or that God loves us. When the word faith is used in the Bible, it sometimes emphasizes trust and it sometimes emphasizes belief. To the extent that our souls and minds are in synch with each other, these two are inter-related. The way we think about God influences our willingness to trust God. To doubt, on the other hand, is to hesitate to trust God with ourselves and/or to believe key assertions about God.

Doubt, more broadly understood as setting aside untested assumptions, is a respected part of the scientific method. In science, every assumption is either identified and analyzed, or it is tested. Although sociologists tell us we are now in a post-modern, post scientific culture, many of us are still influenced by the scientific method in our approach to life, perhaps especially we Episcopalians. We tend to apply the scientific method to the way we think about God and life and its meaning.

Maybe this is why we tend to like, even admire Thomas. He is like us. Passionate as it is, he does not trust the testimony of his friends and fellow students of Jesus. No, Thomas must see Jesus himself, and feel the nail holes in Jesus' hands himself. Thomas himself must touch Jesus' wounded side. This is what Thomas needs in order to believe in the resurrection and he is honest enough and brave enough to demand it.

Our perspective on Thomas' character is defined by this moment of doubt and insistence. We also forget that he is also the disciple that pushed his fellow disciples to join him in going with Jesus to Jerusalem, even if it meant death for them all. We also forget that when Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, she did not believe. Nor did she believe when she saw Jesus standing in the flesh right in front of her. Instead, she thought Jesus to be the gardener. Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, believed only after Jesus reached out to her personally. "Mary" Jesus said. Then she remembered, believed, trusted again. We also forget that Jesus' closest associates, the

disciples gathered behind closed doors in Jerusalem, were full of fear. They neither believed Mary Magdalene's testimony that Jesus was alive, nor did they trust God. Only when the risen Christ appeared to them personally, offered them peace and allowed them to touch his wounds, did they believe he was Jesus. Only then did they trust him. Doubting Thomas was no different than doubting Mary Magdalene or the doubting disciples gathered in fear behind closed doors, or than us in our doubts and fear.

Jesus did not condemn any of his followers who struggled to believe he was resurrected, who did not trust him immediately. Instead, he came to them and gave them what they needed to believe again, to trust again, to again be in relationship with Him. He let them touch his wounds. I wonder what made that important . . . ? Why did they, and why do we, need to know our God suffers? What makes it easier for us to trust a bloodied God, with wounded hands and side? Is this, perhaps, how we know that he loves us?

We simultaneously suffer from loneliness and fight the temptation to be selfish as we struggle with COVID-19. We long for God's friendship as well as deeper connections to one another. The deadly force of this virus seems larger than we are. We want to trust in Something/Someone bigger than us, stronger than the virus, smarter even than the gifted scientists who are seeking a cure and a vaccine. The Something/Someone who is beyond the limits of our greatest humanity is of course God. God is greater than our doubts, stronger than our fears, and God created the world we attempt to understand. So, let us adopt the honesty of doubting Thomas, and cry out to God for what we need. Let us persist like the grief-stricken Mary until we recognize Christ with us. Like the disciples behind closed doors, let us place our hands in Christ's wounds, recognizing that those bloodied holes prove a love that is willing to suffer with us and for us. And, finally, let us trust that God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, loves us profoundly even in the midst of this pandemic, and the suffering, illness, and death it brings. Let us believe even now that God is good. And when we can't, let us be honest enough and brave enough to pound on heaven's door and insist that Christ comes, and gives us what we need to have faith.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.