
Do Not Be Unbelieving, but Believe

[Click here for the podcast](#)

The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
April 11, 2010
The Second Sunday of Easter - Year C

Last Sunday as we celebrated the Great Vigil of Easter, I was captivated by the lighting of the new fire and the paschal candle. As the Dean carried the large candle up the hill, light taken from it was used to light the hundreds of small candles that we each carried as we moved behind him. Slowly, as we made our way along the dark driveway to the great doors of the Cathedral, the light began to spread. There was no formal procession—we simply made our way down the center and side aisles, streaming in to find our pews by the light of tiny flames. After I found my seat at the front of the church, I could not resist turning around, watching as the faithful crowded into the nave.

While Canon Knowlton was chanting the Exultet, I continued to look behind me to witness the light growing brighter, shimmering off the stone columns and dancing on the stained glass windows—dispelling the early morning darkness. As the light of the candles merged, I felt connected to all of the other worshippers. A community gathered together in the darkness, listening to the stories of our faith, waiting to proclaim the first alleluias of Easter and our belief in the risen Christ. I thought about other Christian communities who were gathering all around the world and doing the same thing; lighting fires and candles and professing their faith in Jesus Christ.

The lesson from the gospel of John this morning is all about coming to believe that Jesus is our risen Lord—the messiah, the savior, the Eternal Word made flesh who reveals God to us. Although it has been eight days since we celebrated Easter, our gospel story picks up only eight or 10 hours after the women discovered the empty tomb.
"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week,"

The disciples have imprisoned themselves in the upper room, fearful of the political and religious leaders. Nothing quells their fear—not the women's story of angelic messengers or Jesus' empty tomb. They cannot believe the good news that Jesus is alive. Then suddenly, without warning or a knock on the door, Jesus appears in the middle of the locked room, greeting them with words of peace, showing them his wounded body. They needed their own encounter with him to turn their fear into rejoicing. Jesus brings them peace and comfort, the peace he promised them before going to his death.

But the encounter is not over yet. Jesus sends them out into the world to continue his ministry—now their ministry—of bringing forgiveness to the world. To aid them in this endeavor, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them. It is the Great Commission and Pentecost all wrapped up together. But there is one disciple who is not present: Thomas. We don't know why he was absent from the rest of the group. When the others tell him that they have seen the risen Jesus, he refuses to believe without seeing and touching Jesus himself. He demands empirical evidence.

For his demand Thomas gets his nickname—Doubting Thomas—a nickname he really does not deserve. In a careful reading of the text, we discover that Thomas is no more of a doubter than anyone else who has encountered Jesus after the

resurrection. In fact, he is asking for a similar experience as the women at the tomb and the other disciples have been given a chance to see, to hear, and to touch Jesus.

"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 does not doubt; he simply does not believe what he hears.

Eight days pass and the disciples, including Thomas, are gathered again behind closed doors when Jesus comes and stands in the middle of the room. He addresses Thomas directly, presenting himself to him, asking Thomas to touch his wounds. Jesus says, "Do not doubt but believe." The translation we read uses doubt, but doubt does not appear in the original text.

Other possible ways we might translate this verse are:

Do not become unbelieving, but believing,

do not become unfaithful, but faithful,

do not become uncertain, but certain,

do not become distrusting, but trusting.

When read this way, Jesus is urging Thomas to be transformed as he discovers for himself who Jesus really is.

We don't know if Thomas reaches out to touch Jesus; John never says one way or the other. What is clearly evident here is that Jesus continues to do as he has done throughout the gospel; Jesus meets people where they are, in their deepest need with his grace and abundant love. Thomas is at a crossroad what will he become? Without hesitation Thomas proclaims, "My Lord and my God." He is believing, faithful, certain, and trusting that Jesus is God's revelation to the world.

This episode with Thomas is the culmination of the whole of the gospel of John. Thomas' declaration is the counter-point to the opening prologue of John,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Not one thing came into being without him and he has made God known to us,"

All of John's writings, the signs, the teachings, the journeys of Jesus with the disciples, his death and his resurrection everything John remembers bring us to this one point: the declaration that Jesus is God. It is the final sign! If John's purpose in writing his gospel is to confront the readers and hearers that Jesus is the revelation of God, then Thomas is the one who has made this connection. Thomas has moved forward in his faith, trusting in the revelation of God in Christ. And Thomas is the only one to make this claim.

As wonderful as Thomas' new found belief is, our passage concludes with a special message for each one of us all of us who believe without having seen, or heard, or touched Jesus in the flesh.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The events remembered and recorded by John present to us Jesus the Word, the revealer of God. We see not by sight, but by faith; trust removes our blindness. John's sin has little to do with moral failure; sin is the inability to receive revelation, to remain blind to the revealing of God in Jesus the Word made flesh.

The Good News is given to us through those who were willing to be witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Like Thomas, we were not present when Jesus sent the disciples out to continue his work. Nor did he breathe on us to receive the Holy Spirit to empower us to forgive sin. However the disciples in that room are representative of all disciples who follow them in faith. In baptism, we join them in dying to sin and blindness, believing that Jesus is the Son of God. Rising from the waters and sealed with the Holy Spirit, we are empowered for service in the world.

Baptism is our commission to go forth and preach the gospel in word and deed. This is our calling, our purpose to be revealers of God so that others might also see and believe. This is how we fulfill the command of Jesus to forgive sin. When we fail to share the good news, that's when sin is retained. That is when we miss the opportunity to help open the eyes of someone else. Our participation in the saving and life-giving work of Christ are grounds for rejoicing. For we, like the disciples locked in the upper room, experience a mystical encounter with the risen Christ as we reach out and touch the lives of others.

Jesus still comes to us today. We hear and see him in the scriptures. We experience him intimately in the touch and hugs we offer one another as we share our joy and pain. As we gather together week after week, we encounter the risen Christ in

our common prayer and by participating in the sacraments. We see and taste and touch and smell Jesus in the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the Psalmist declares, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Community and prayer, word and sacrament are the means of grace that allow us to taste and see"to taste and know God. The means of grace lead us to hope and give us the ability to echo Thomas saying, "My Lord and my God."

This year, the calendars of the Western and the Eastern churches coincided and we all celebrated Holy Week and Easter at the same time. On Holy Saturday, hundreds of pilgrims from Greek, Russian, Armenian, and Coptic Orthodox churches entered the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. They gathered in prayer to wait for the miraculous lighting of the Holy Fire at the site that is believed to be Golgotha. They waited in faith for the Patriarch to enter the cell and to come out with the fire that symbolizes Jesus' resurrection. All of the faithful carry candles and torches and when the bishop emerges with the flame, they light their candles one by one.

Soon the flame passes throughout the church to the entrance. From there, the courtyards and streets surrounding the church are ablaze with light, the bells in the towers ring to proclaim the good news of the empty tomb. What is equally astounding to me is that emissaries from Orthodox churches charter planes that take them, with the holy flame, to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Armenia, and places as far away as the Ukraine and Russia. The flame is carried to light the new fire in Cathedrals and parish churches to celebrate the Great Vigil of Easter. The fire spreads its light across the world in witness to the risen Christ. There must be great belief and great trust for these pilgrims to make this long journey year after year. They, like us, have been transformed by the gospel and together we echo Thomas saying to Jesus, "My Lord and my God."

Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Buddy Crawford at: bcrawford@stphilipscathedral.org.