

**Second Sunday of Easter (Year B) – April 12, 2015**  
**Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**Thomas and the Journey of Faith  
as an Easter People in this Good Friday World<sup>i</sup>**

Each year on this Second Sunday of Easter we encounter Thomas—and his doubts. Of course, Thomas wasn't alone in his questioning. In fact, there is something a little strange about Jesus' Resurrection appearances in the Gospels, and it boils down to this: in every gospel account, no matter the difference in persons or places involved, the disciples and friends of Jesus are surprised utterly by the Resurrection. It is as though everything had escaped them, from Jesus' parable hints to the outright and straightforward promises he made that he would be raised from the dead. Instead, the disciples cower behind closed doors and resign themselves to the cruel fate of his death. The resurrection is neither awaited nor expected. It catches them entirely off guard.

Then there was Thomas, the most famous of those in the Bible for whom the Resurrection was unexpected. After Judas Iscariot, Thomas—called the Twin—has been the next most maligned of Jesus' disciples. Judas was the Betrayer and Thomas was the Doubter. Of course, all the other disciples did their full share of fleeing and betraying and doubting, but they aren't remembered for these things alone. And it wasn't for lack of faith or commitment that Thomas doubted. In fact, earlier, upon hearing of the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus in Bethany—and when people were threatening to stone Jesus if he went back there—it was Thomas who boldly declared to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Thomas was the only disciple on record as having perceived the purpose and meaning and likely consequences of Jesus' mission, the extent of which would involve a dying.<sup>ii</sup> And so, it shouldn't seem remarkable that Thomas who had put out his whole being for Jesus, doubted the loudest when he was told only second-hand of the Resurrection. For him, the loss of Jesus on the cross was that much more tragic, and his grief was all the more bitter. So also was his confusion, his fatigue, his anger and remorse.

I like Thomas the Twin a lot, perhaps because I feel that I know him pretty well, this twin of mine, this twin of us all. In our gospel reading today, Thomas was absent from that locked room of fearful disciples, absent and wary. And though he too held shut the door of his own heart,<sup>iii</sup> Thomas also exhibits a great virtue in which, through his doubt rather than through certainty, he comes to a deeper faith. As William Barclay put it, Thomas "refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe...He [did not] still his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. [Thomas was not a person] who would rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about."<sup>iv</sup> The poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson had Thomas in mind when he wrote, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." Thomas, of course, was in good company with other very committed people in the Bible: from Moses, to Jeremiah, to John the Baptist (to name a few), we see people who gave their all to their calling, their people, even when deep questionings surfaced. For some this came when

they were suffering the consequences of their commitment—Moses stuck in the wilderness with a number of hungry and contentious people; Jeremiah and John the Baptist each thrown in prison. Not to mention Jesus himself who could not still his doubt on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For many of us, it has been in the midst of giving your all for your family, your work, your community; and, either through sudden loss or other crises or just plain exhaustion, things fall apart and deep questions arise, often about the meaning and purpose of our lives and relationships, and where God is in all this. Such questioning grips even the most committed people; and too-easy answers or fixes, or someone else’s explanations may only serve to increase the doubt. Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel wrote about his youth in Hungary in his powerful book, Night. He writes of the encounter with an elderly man named Moche, the sexton (or beadle) who cleaned the synagogue where Elie prayed as a child. One afternoon Moche saw young Elie at prayer and asked him, “Why do you pray?” They talked and Moche told young Elie the way of questions: “...every question possessed a power that *did not lie in the answer*. Man raises himself to God [through the] questions he asks.” Then young Elie asked him, “And why do you pray, Moche?” Moche replied, “I pray that [God] will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions.”<sup>v</sup>

It is important, then, to affirm the serious questionings that arise in each of us as we try our darndest to live our lives in committed and caring and purposeful ways. We know well that failures, fragile relationships and difficult moments can set our faith off while at other times it seems fully on. Of course, that is what faith is—an on-again off-again journey, not a once-and-for-all arrival. Faith is defined in the Letter to the Hebrews as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith as a journey, often without maps, means not being sure where you are going, but going anyway. And our questionings don’t destroy our commitment; in fact, questioning often leads to an even deeper and renewed faith.<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, to live with our uncertainties is not only a necessary part of our formation in faith; it is the very truth of faith and a hallmark of discipleship.<sup>vii</sup> And so, to theologian Paul Tillich, our questioning doubt is what he called the “Protestant Principle”—Protestantism’s greatest contribution to the Christian search for truth.<sup>viii</sup> To me, Thomas, in acknowledging his doubt, is a role model of faith, as, like most of us, he came to faith *through* his doubt.

Thomas’ doubt was neither a stopping place, nor a hiding place, but rather a stepping stone to a deeper faith. As the Risen Jesus encounters Thomas for the first time a week later than the rest of the disciples, Jesus honors Thomas’ doubt, and at the same time, he encourages Thomas’ belief as he invites him to see and feel the truth for himself. The Resurrected Jesus was as real as Thomas’ doubt. What Thomas *did* know was how to recognize Jesus—by his wounds, of course; as if to say that you can’t look for, nor see and touch the Risen One unless you can see the crucified One. The same crucified risen Lord extends his shattered hands to us and invites us to touch his wounds and connect to his woundedness today as he appears in the distressing disguise of the poor, the abused, the lonely, and appears in every form of human need, injustice and woundedness that the world is free to acknowledge and address - or ignore.

An image that comes to mind regarding the importance of deep questioning is that of comparing our doubts to the necessity of friction in life. Some years ago now, I was greatly amused during a half-time show at a Philadelphia Flyers hockey game which I saw at a time when I lived in nearby Delaware. At the beginning of the half-time festivities, out came Miss Delaware who attempted to walk to the middle of the ice arena. Now, I don't mean to pick on Miss Delaware, rather, just her choice of shoes. With her elegant dress and tiara and Miss Delaware sash and regal wave, she set out across the ice with great poise and confidence. However, she was wearing these outrageously high spiky heels that gave her absolutely no friction—no traction—on the ice. Within two steps she was slipping all over the place, and had to have two escorts with firm frictional footwear—one on each arm—literally carry her to the middle of the ice, and then back. With that image in mind, look at the many contradictions and ironies in our lives, such as being at home yet not feeling at home; being busy yet feeling empty; being well regarded yet feeling lonely; being a believer yet feeling many doubts; being loved yet feeling unloved or unlovable. These all cause a kind of friction in our lives, what Shakespeare called “the rub” of life. These make us feel a level of frustration and prevent us from being fully present, in the moment. Every door that opens for us makes us see how many more doors are closed to us and to others. Our anxious pursuit of happiness can make us unhappy. And yet, these same contradictions, and the questionings that arise from them, can bring us in touch with a deeper longing for the fulfillment of a desire that lives beneath all desires, and that only God can satisfy. Contradictions and doubts, frustrations and questions thus understood, create the necessary friction, traction that can help us move toward God—without slipping all over the place. Thomas Merton summed it up well, and so I conclude with his words:

“It is only when the apparent absurdity of life is faced in all truth, that faith really becomes possible. Otherwise faith tends to be a kind of diversion, a spiritual amusement, in which one gathers up accepted conventional formulas and arranges them in the approved mental patterns, without bothering to investigate their meaning, or asking if they have any practical consequences in one's life.”<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The phrase “an Easter people in a Good Friday world” is attributed by some to Barbara Johnson, *Splashes of Joy in the Cesspools of Life* (W Publishing Group/Thomas Nelson, 1992), pp. 193ff. – although I have used this phrase since I first heard it from both Bishop Barbara Harris and William Sloane Coffin in the 1980s.

<sup>ii</sup> ...and he ends up being the only disciple to directly and unequivocally call Jesus God.

<sup>iii</sup> ...for fear, for tough-mindedness, and for doubt that became his hallmark.

<sup>iv</sup> William Barclay, *We Have Seen the Lord* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998)

<sup>v</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972, 1985)

<sup>vi</sup> In fact, our questionings can help us navigate waymarks and discern guideposts and even a sense of “true north,” as it were, from our own GPS, i.e. our own God Positioning System. And that can lead us to “the conviction of things not seen,” especially when we can't see ahead and don't have a clear map. So, doubt is not the opposite of faith, nor the end of faith; rather, it is an element of faith.

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<sup>vii</sup> Frederick Buechner states, “So whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” See Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 20

<sup>viii</sup> Even many quite certain folk out there are themselves deep down, doubting Thomases—as writer and mystic Robert Pirsig put it, “You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. [Think about it:] no one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it is going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it’s always because these dogmas or goals are [really] in doubt.” (Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1974) Ch. 13). Just as acknowledged or hidden doubt is not the opposite of faith, certainty, on the other hand, can become faith’s opposite; for faith is not blind or unquestioning adherence, but rather it is the open space in our hearts and minds in which God can act. Or as Buechner stated, “...if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep.” – Buechner, *Ibid.* Of course, to some who want certainty more than truth—exact directions more than an inner compass or GPS—the presence of a doubting Thomas borders on blasphemy or atheism. See also Julia Baird, “Doubt as a Sign of Faith” in *The New York Times* (September 26, 2014).

<sup>ix</sup> Thomas Merton Disputed Questions (Kentucky: The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1960)