

April 19, 2009 [White] Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133 (UMH 850)

1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Revised Standard Version of the Bible

¹⁹On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, *"Peace be with you."*²⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."*²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

²⁴Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, *"We have seen the Lord."* But he said to them, *"Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

²⁶Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, *"Peace be with you."*²⁷Then he said to Thomas, *"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing."*²⁸Thomas answered him, *"My Lord and my God!"*²⁹Jesus said to him, *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

Doubt

Our Gospel reading for this morning comes from the Book of John, the twentieth chapter, and picks up right after the resurrection story of Easter morning. The disciples, and perhaps others, were gathered in the room where Jesus had led them in the last supper only a few days earlier.

At this point, they may have believed that Christ had risen - after all Simon Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary Magdalene had all been there at the tomb - but that hadn't emboldened them much. They were all in this room behind locked doors, looking out for the authorities that had crucified Jesus. In that time and in that place it was not unusual for the Romans and their local representatives to round up the followers of rabble-rousers and subject them to the same justice as their leader. So they had reason to be watchful.

Jesus came into the room and spoke to them and showed them the wounds from the crucifixion. He then blessed them, breathed the Holy Spirit on them, and instructed them to follow in his footsteps. That is all well and fine, except for one small wrinkle. One of the disciples, Thomas, was not there.

By the time Thomas returns to the room, Jesus is gone. The other disciples are telling Thomas about the amazing things that Jesus has said, and done, and their experience with the Risen Lord. But Thomas is having none of it. He tells them straight out that he won't believe it until and unless he sees Jesus just as they have.

So Jesus comes again, pretty much the same way as the time before. He knows about Thomas and his doubts, because Jesus addresses Thomas directly. He tells Thomas to feel his wounds and believe. At that, Thomas makes perhaps the most direct statement about Jesus's divinity of any in the Bible, saying "*My Lord and my God!*" Thomas, the doubter, finally gets it.

When I was a youngster in Sunday School, Thomas was referred to as Doubting Thomas - and people who were skeptical were called Doubting Thomas's as well. My impressions from that time were that Thomas was regarded as sort of a second class disciple because of his doubt. Not as bad as Judas, to be sure, but not quite on the level with the others. I don't recall anyone specifically saying so, but that is my impression.

But looking back on it after all these years, I think that Doubting Thomas may have gotten a bad rap. After all, the other disciples needed to have Jesus visit them as well and show them his wound before they would get it - even with the Easter experience that Peter, the Beloved, and Mary had had only a day earlier. So Thomas's biggest problem seems to be that he gave voice to his doubts, and the Gospel writer John recorded them for us all to see. One small screw up, and you are labeled for the next two thousand years!

At this point, I would like to veer off from the story of Thomas and address some

issues of Christian theology and church history.

The Gospel of John is generally thought to be the last of the four gospels written, some time towards the end of the first century. At that time, there was much debate and controversy among Christians about who or what Jesus really was. After all, Jesus said, and most of his followers believed that he was the Son of God. And yet he looked and acted like a human, even to being crucified. So who was this Jesus?

Different groups of believers had different views on the subject. If Jesus was a human, and not divine, then what is the point of following him and putting your faith in his power to save? After all, we don't do that with other humans, no matter how wise or heroic they might be. About the most that our human heroes get is a statue, or a day off from work in their honor, or maybe a documentary on the History Channel.

On the other hand, if Jesus was a divine spirit manifestation of God - well that presents problems as well. If Jesus was just a spirit visiting and appearing in our world, then he can't be crucified - or killed in any other way for that matter. If that is the case, then what was Jesus doing on the cross - just pretending to die? If Jesus's crucifixion was just for show, then his resurrection was just for show as well. If Jesus just made the whole thing up, then what is the point of the whole thing, and where is the saving action of him offering himself up as a sacrifice for our sins?

You can see that if you go down that path very far, the problems mount in a hurry. Nevertheless, there was a group, of Christian believers called the Gnostics that felt just that way. Now, I have talked about the Gnostics before when I preached on the subject of the DaVinci Code book and movie - so I won't go into their beliefs today. Suffice it to say that the Gnostics were pitted against other Christian believers in how they understood Jesus.

So what does this have to do with the Gospel story of Doubting Thomas? Well, many theologians believe that John included the story of Doubting Thomas in his Gospel specifically to refute the beliefs of the Gnostics. By including the story of Thomas, John is reinforcing his belief that Jesus was not *only* a spiritual being.

Look at today's passage again. Jesus appears in the room with the disciples, apparently by walking right through the shut door. The passage doesn't say so in as many words, but it sure strongly implies it. A Jesus that walks through doors, or walks on water, or heals lepers, is not an ordinary human being. On the other

hand, Jesus is standing in front of them - a solid flesh and blood person showing them his wounds. So he wasn't just a spirit manifestation, a disembodied ghost.

From this story, and others as well, the prevailing belief of Christians then - including John, and down through the years to the present day, is that Jesus was both human - and divine. This seeming paradox undergirds Christian thought about Jesus and forms the bedrock of our beliefs.

Here is a little factoid of Christian symbolism for you. When we brought the candle lighter up this morning to light the two candles on the altar, we refer to it as "The Light of Christ Enters". That is why those words are printed in the bulletin each week. So if the light of Christ enters the sanctuary with the candle lighter, then the two candles on the altar must represent Christ. If so, then why are there two candles instead of one, or three, or some other number? Is it some appeal to the desire of church members to have an even number of candles - symmetry on the altar? No, not really. In reality, the symbolism of having two candles representing Christ is what I told you earlier - the two natures of Jesus - fully human - fully divine.

Back to the story of Doubting Thomas. After Jesus shows Thomas his wounds, he says *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."* With those words, Jesus - and John - extend Jesus's blessing from Thomas and the other disciples, to us. After all, we and all the Christians down through the ages, are the ones who believe and yet have not seen Jesus in person and felt his wounds. Yet we are blessed. As blessed as the disciples were. That is Jesus's gift to us.

Carol and I recently watched a movie called Doubt. Last year, we saw the theatrical version of the play Doubt at Pioneer Theater, and we really enjoyed it. So when the movie version came out on DVD, Carol ordered it - and we watched it the other night. It was every bit as good as the play had been, and I strongly recommend it if you haven't seen it.

The movie is, as you might guess, about doubt. The three main characters are all Roman Catholics serving a parish in New York back in the mid sixties. Two of them are nuns - teachers in the parochial school. A young nun called Sister James, played by Amy Adams, and an older nun, Sister Aloysious, played by Meryl Streep. The third character is the parish priest played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman.

In the course of the story, the two nuns began to suspect that the Priest is having

improper relations with one of the students, the schools first, and so far, only black pupil. The priest denies it, but can offer no proof that he is innocent. The older nun, Sister Aloyicious strongly believes that he did abuse the boy, although she can find no proof either. The story plays out to its end - I won't give away the ending - and throughout - the characters have to deal with their doubt - as does the viewer. None of us ever finds out what really happened, and we are left with our doubt, and our belief.

At one point in the movie, the priest preaches a sermon about doubt. This is shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, and the priest addresses the doubt that he and the other parishioners are feeling about their lives - their government - their future. In the sermon, he tells the congregation that our doubt is what we have in common - it is what binds us together.

That statement struck me, because it echoes the story of Doubting Thomas in today's scripture. Just like Thomas - just like the priest and his congregation - just like the two nuns - just like the movie viewers - just like you and I - we are left with our doubts. It is what we have in common, and it binds us together. Just like Thomas, we doubt some times. I know I do, and I strongly suspect that you do as well. Just like the two nuns we doubt and we believe - the young nun that the priest is innocent, and the old nun that he is guilty.

The good news however, is that our doubt and belief are two sides of the same coin. Thomas was a doubter, and yet he believed. We doubt too some times, yet we believe as well. And as Jesus said to Thomas - "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*" Blessed are we.
Amen.