

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend David Mesenbring
The Second Sunday of Easter, March 30, 2008
Acts 2:14a, 22-32; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

~~Don't~~ Be a Doubting Thomas

One thing I love about Saint Mark's is the variety of ways people come to be here on any given Sunday. Some are here every week; some once in a while; and still others are here today for the first time. So I know that some of you don't yet know that the Dean's resignation was announced two days ago. Now, if you're reeling from that news, then you won't be surprised to hear me say that this news is why some people are *not* here today. But it may surprise you to hear me also say that some *are* here because of that news. In between, is a huge group who are so confused that you don't know *what* to think! I want to name that reality as a way making sure we're all on the same page to discover how providential is this particular gospel reading for our community this morning.

In the verse prior to where today's reading starts in John, Mary Magdalene tells the disciples that she has seen Jesus. Luke says they considered her news "an idle tale." Our text in John opens with the disciples locked up in fear on that first Easter day and, presumably, far from convinced. The leader who'd held them together was missing and they must have been very confused and scared about what would happen next. Today's first lesson from the book of Acts has Peter proclaiming Christ's resurrection with Pentecost fire. This occurs 50 days after the evening when our gospel story opens. On the first day of the resurrection, I can guarantee you that there were conflicting points of view about what to do next.

Is that what kept Thomas away? We don't know why he was missing when the other disciples gathered. But I don't think it's because he was faint of heart. We last ran him three weeks ago in that story of Lazarus being raised. I preached that Sunday on "Matters of Life and Death" about a controversy between Jesus and his disciples over whether returning to Judea would be safe so soon after Jesus narrowly escaped getting killed. It

was Thomas who settled that question saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Those are not the words of a weak-kneed guy whom we commonly vilify as "doubting Thomas." Soon after today's story, he shows up again as one of three fishermen whose fortunes are dramatically changed when a stranger calls to them from ashore suggesting they try their nets on the other side of their boat.

In today's story, Thomas is first absent, then doubtful, and finally convicted, exclaiming "My Lord and my God!" To get there, he needed the same evidence that had converted his fellow disciples from doubt to faith: some witness of resurrected life.

The contemporary author Mary Gordon writes "I think faith without doubt is just either nostalgia or a kind of addiction." A faith so rigid it can't tolerate contradiction is like the crutch of a stunting addiction. And a faith that won't embrace challenging new realities is often trapped in nostalgia.

At Tuesday's Bible study, the Rev. Pat Taylor commented how faith sometimes begins in a dramatic, revolutionary, way. But to stay healthy, it proceeds evolutionarily. I think doubt is critical to that process. Thomas' doubt preceded the same experience that helped other disciples get excited about living into the resurrection. Faith and doubt coexist symbiotically on a spectrum. Our job is to keep the line between them dynamically moving in one direction and another.

Sometimes faith needs doubt. Galileo challenged a popular faith that the earth is in fixed position. For asserting it circles the sun, he was imprisoned as a heretic. Doubt, also needs its companion, faith. In a wonderful sermon last Sunday called "Thinking too Much," Bishop Rickel suggested we're sometimes better off resting upon the assurance of faith instead of

'thinking too much.' I define faith as "believing what we can't know." Sometimes we're better off resting on our faith while, at other times, we need our doubts.

So faith needs doubt, doubt needs faith, and both need community. Both doubt and faith need the kind of nurture that only a community can offer. Last Wednesday evening, about 50 people gathered in Bloedel Hall for a conversation that had been planned to discuss news that was, in the end, not yet available. There was a marvelous conversation about our various hopes and fears and doubts and faith. I think everyone present would say their faith got stretched in some new ways. Two who were planning to come changed their minds after seeing an email earlier that day informing them that "the news" had been delayed yet again. They sent an email to the Cathedral "...withholding our pledge for 2008 because of the bungling, fumbling and withholding of information. ...it seems the mismanagement of the whole process is worse than the subject matter of the mediation." They missed a rich conversation Wednesday. Will they come back today?

Both faith and doubt need the nurture of community. I know - this is not a matter of my faith now - I *know* that among those gathered here right now, are doubts and faith that contradict one another. Some of you believe the Dean was gravely mistreated while others question whether he had too much responsibility and benefit. Some of you have been living with absolute faith in the Dean's leadership and future here while others doubted we'd survive if he remained in place. Some of you doubt now that we can get through this change while others have faith it's going to be the most exciting Easter season ever. I have a deep faith that in the *mix* of those contradictions we are given a gift of God, if only we can keep community! If we can share all our doubts and varieties of faith with one another, then we will gift one another and become a much stronger congregation together.

Both doubt and faith need the nurture of community. An email this week from one whose mother died recently states that she'd "not been this close to death before. ...I have been touched by the way so many people are willing to share their own experiences of the loss of a loved one – a *community in a sense*." I read that and thought isn't this part of what 'resurrected life' is about?

Today's gospel identifies some features of life in the community of people celebrating resurrection. Hear again the first words Jesus offers his frightened disciples: "Peace be with you." He repeats the same phrase to emphasize its importance. So, that's one feature. Then he commissions them saying, "As God has sent me, so I send you."

Over the next few months, we're going to hear stories about times when this or another congregation lost its senior clergy person. I'd bet a lot of money one common theme that'll emerge is how the leader's departure can be followed by a resurrection of lay leaders who step up to fill the leadership gap, and then sit right back down again as soon as a new priest shows up. At the moment when Jesus' disciples were grieving his absence, he says to them "Just as God sent me, now I send you." There's another feature of life resurrected.

Verse 23 reads: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. But if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* The Greek word from which we get "forgive" translates literally as "let go of." This is not the time when Jesus is giving his disciples the *authority* to forgive sins. Rather, he's pointing them – and us – toward a healthy spiritual discipline that requires us to 'let go of' sins causing us to suffer because 'retaining' them will otherwise corrode our spirits. This is another feature of resurrected life.

On the phone Friday I told my sister how scared I am by the awesome responsibility of preaching in this situation today. When I mentioned that baby baptisms would be occurring, she exclaimed "That's perfect! Baptism is about new life!"

So what are we going to do about these six precious babies here this morning? What kind of community will we offer the nurture of their growing doubts and faith? Will it have courage to practice that 'new covenant of reconciliation' claimed by today's collect? What faith - *and doubts* - will you invest in their nurture by your renewal of the Baptismal Covenant's promises? At the Easter Vigil, Bishop Ricketts stated "baptisms change your community forever." Are we ready?

Passing on to our children a faith only nostalgic or addictive will not be enough for the scary looking world they're coming into. If we in this room, together with other doubters who're missing today; if we learn to love one another in a manner safe enough to share the broadest range of doubts and fears, then we might just nurture enough faith to give these children a community in which their doubts can evolve our faith too. Trust me: with the wild world we've got on our hands right now, all our doubts won't be enough for the future we're baptizing these babies into. We'll need the doubts of all God's children - including the ones who don't look like us and don't live like us – before we achieve God's promise of resurrection. And for that we need to keep community, together. That's my prayer. Let the congregation say... Amen.