

“The Faithful Doubting Thomas”

Acts 5:27-32 and John 20:19-31

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April 11, 2010

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Acts 5:27-32

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

May the words from my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you Lord, now and forever, Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson is a popular one, as well as being a well known one. It is so well known we even have derived the term "doubting Thomas" from it. In fact it is the only thing that Thomas is remembered for. Thomas isn't the only person whom history has defined by a single experience. Consider: Richard Nixon is remembered more for the Watergate break-in than for the normalization of relations with China. George Armstrong Custer is known more for his defeat at Little Big Horn than for being the youngest general in the Union Army. Babe Ruth is known as the Home Run King even though he also holds the dubious distinction of being the Strike-out King. Maybe it's time we give Thomas a break as we look at his story.

Many times have I heard from the pulpit a sermon that emphasizes John chapter 20 verse 29. It says, "Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Well I can't deny that Jesus is correct in saying that those who believe without seeing are blessed, because I truly do believe they are. However, I have to ask myself, "How many people are really in that category?" I will say to you right now that I have had times when my faith was less than perfect, and, although I hope it doesn't happen, I may have times in the future where I question my faith.

I think that, is what being human is all about. I'm willing to bet that almost everyone listening to me here today has also had a moment or two of doubt, a moment of questioning, a moment where you come across something in life that makes you ask, "Is there really a God", or "why did God let this happen?"

I could try to lift this Gospel up to those of perfect faith, but I think I would rather speak to those of us with less than perfect faith, because this Gospel lesson is for us as well.

It is interesting to note that all of the disciples were doubters. If you look at John chapter 20 verse 18 you will note that Mary had come to the disciples and told them of what she had seen at the tomb. She had proclaimed the resurrection, yet the disciples were still hiding in sorrow and fear. None of the disciples rejoiced until they had seen Jesus and touched the wounds from the crucifixion. They also must have doubted what had been told to them by Mary, yet none of them are stigmatized as much as Thomas is, because he happened to be gone the first time Jesus came. Was the word of the male disciples somehow supposed to be more believable than the word of Mary? I don't think so; in fact I might even suggest that it would be more suspect. I imagine that these disciples had been together for quite a while and had gotten to know each other well while following Jesus. When you have that many guys hanging out together there is almost certainly going to be one who likes to tease and play pranks on the others. Imagine being with these guys hiding, and worried. I can easily see Thomas imagining one of them turning to the others and saying, "Hey, when Thomas comes back let's play a prank on him. We'll all say that Mary was right and Jesus is resurrected. We'll say that he actually appeared before us." Upon hearing this Thomas would say, "Ha ha guys, very funny. You think I'm going to fall for that one?"

My point is that we are fallible human beings, and we doubt many things until we experience them ourselves. God created us and understands that sometimes we may lack faith, even in things that others tell us are true. In an episode on the hit television show Friends. Two of the characters are having a debate about evolution. One of them seeks to prove that evolution is a fact by bringing in a box full of fossils to impress his friend. He tells her that years of scientific discovery and research show that, without a doubt, evolution is a fact. He asks her how she could disbelieve in the face of all the evidence. She replies that lately she didn't believe in gravity, either. It seemed like she was being pulled forward rather than down. He goes into hysterics, seriously doubting her sanity. She comes back with something like this, 'Okay, tell me this. Don't you have

the tiniest little doubt that you could be wrong? After all, scientists used to believe the world was flat and they were wrong. Scientists used to believe the atom was the smallest thing in the universe until someone cracked it open. What makes you think that someone won't come along with another theory that will prove that evolution is wrong?' A long silence ensues. He replies, 'Maybe you're right.' She explodes, 'Is that all it takes? You've allowed me to crush your whole belief system? I thought you were stronger than that.'

What is more difficult to explain are the times when God does touch someone's life and they still won't believe. When God does the equivalent of Jesus showing us the marks on his arms and we still say, "Prove it to me."

Some of you may have seen the movie "Leap of Faith" starring Steve Martin. He plays a hustler preacher named Jonas Nightingale, the boss of a traveling tent revival show complete with a full Gospel choir, a huge stage set up with lights and cameras. He even has a suit coat covered with tiny mirrors that shine like a disco ball when a spotlight is put on them and he turns in circles doing a little jig. He has great stage presence, he inspires his listeners, he even makes people believe, but he has no faith himself.

Life is one big con and money making opportunity for him, so when one of the trucks in his caravan breaks down in a desolate Kansas town facing a bad drought he sets up the show to make some money. In the process he runs into a young man with incredible faith whose legs were badly injured in a car accident. When Jonas gets to the faith healing part of his show the boy asks to be healed. Jonas tries to wiggle out of it several times, but the boy is persistent. Jonas goes through the motions expecting to fail, yet miraculously the boy is healed.

This miracle shakes Jonas to the core. Instead of embracing the miracle Jonas runs away, leaving his show and everyone else behind. As he hitchhikes away he is picked up by a trucker. As they are driving away rain starts coming down, another miracle that will save the crops of the farmers in that small Kansas town, another poke at Jonas to prove that God is there and listening to him. Jonas acknowledges that this second miracle is happening, but can't accept his part in it. He wants nothing to do with it, or with God.

Are we going to be like that? If we are having a crisis of faith are we going to ignore God coming to us? Are we going to ignore the little miracles that happen in our lives?

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe, but those who need to see Jesus and feel the wounds are also blessed.

Dorothy Sayers says this about the disciple Thomas: It is unexpected, but extraordinarily convincing, that the one absolutely unequivocal statement in the whole gospel of the Divinity of Jesus should come from Doubting Thomas. It is the only place where the word God is used ... without qualification of any kind, and in the most unambiguous form of words.... And this must be said -- not ecstatically, or with a cry of astonishment -- but with flat conviction, as of one acknowledging irrefutable evidence: '2 + 2 = 4,' 'that is the sun in the sky,' 'You are my Lord and my God!'

I hope that when our faith is less than perfect all of us will be alert and attentive enough to recognize when God comes to us saying, "I am here, and I love you." We may not see a big miracle, or a faith healing, but I think that is because God whispers to us more than God shouts. God can speak to us in little ways, in the support of a friend, the beauty of a sunset, or in the words of a song on the radio.

May we all be open to the signs given to us to bolster our faith, and may we then raise our voices as Thomas did, firmly and with conviction, "You are my Lord and God". Amen