

Second Sunday of Easter
 April 19, 2020
 A Sermon preached by The Rev. Kyle Wagner
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 “Here Comes the Sun”

In our liturgical calendar this weekend, we commemorate Anselm of Canterbury, who died on April 21. He once wrote, “I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe this: unless I believe, I will not understand” Such wise words from an 11th-century monk, who is considered one of the greatest theologians of the Middle Ages. Today in our readings, we once again hear the story of “Doubting Thomas.” Annually this reading shows itself after Easter Sunday. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, what will this reading say to us this year? In the author John’s account of the mysterious events, we have the quiet fear of the disciples, which turns into a loud hope, as Jesus shows up through the locked doors, and into our lives and hearts once again.

Today’s readings, I think, have a couple of themes. Of course, we visit the idea of doubt. The concept of uncertainty and skepticism has hit an all-time high under the current US President, and conspiracy theories run wild as some people seem to base their ideas on politics, beating political opponents, having a “bigly” ego, and not even giving science, reason, or love a chance.

We also could focus on the idea of reputations. Thomas quickly gained a reputation that lasted until today, as he only believed once he felt Jesus’ wounds. Regardless of the manner, we look at Thomas, we can certainly learn a great deal from him. And Lord knows we have a great deal of time to reflect as we continue to exist in our homes.

With all this being said, I think there are three things we can learn from Thomas. First, the disciple who doubted reminds us that faith does not exclude doubt or questions. As a priest, I have doubted. I doubted when my father was ill with Multiple Sclerosis, and when he died. I doubted when I felt a calling to the priesthood, and I doubted when the Edmonton Oilers traded Wayne Gretzky to the Los Angeles Kings. Of course, this trade made me question why God would allow such a terrible thing to happen! You see, there are times, like soldiers dying on the battlefield, 9/11, and this COVID crisis, when we may genuinely question whether God is with us. We struggle to understand when we face darkness, and God seems to be so distant from us. Faith is not always evident, nor does it go unchallenged. Yet, Christians are encouraged to believe. As our Creed says, “I believe in...” and these sets of beliefs are huge, as is the Easter story of the resurrection. Life is full of uncertainty, and faith may lead to certainty, but for some, it doesn’t in a comfortable sureness of logic or scientific proof, but rather in the conviction of one who trusts in God’s word.

The second thing I think we can discover from Thomas was that we receive and experience faith through our communities. This taking place through our relationships with our parents, friends, and our church. Thomas did not find his faith alone. Rather he returned to his community to gather with his friends in the Upper Room. Thomas was grieving that Jesus had died, and what did he do? He returned to his community. The disciple trusted his friends and family enough to show up the following Sunday. As Christians, we are called to show up.

Certainly once this pandemic is over. And we can show up in different ways, as the world has very much changed.

Thomas also testifies that our faith must be rooted in our own experience of God, for he had a unique relationship with Jesus Christ. We cannot merely believe in God, or Jesus because someone else does. It's a personal thing. Sure, we rely on the faith of theirs, to support us, to lift us, but others cannot make us believe.

The third thing that some might struggle with is that from my perspective, our faith isn't just merely a royal assent to the doctrines and precepts of the church. Before the outbreak of the virus, I was leading a confirmation class. As our group reflected on the Creed's, some struggled with what they were saying. At the time when Jesus appeared to Thomas, he had no creeds to accept. He didn't know anything about divinity or the trinity, or the Apostles Creed. He was unaware of how Jesus' teaching just 10 days prior to the Last Supper would transform the very nature of the world. Thomas's faith certainly would have flunked his test on the *39 Articles of Religion*.

You see, most of us clergy field questions about doubt and believing, from people of all ages, and not just young people. Barbara Brown Taylor describes her experience in her wonderful book, *Leaving Church*. She said that some believed

“less than they thought they should about Jesus. They were not troubled by the idea that he may have had two human parents instead of one, or that his real presence with his disciples after his death might have been more metaphysical than physical... For others, the issue was that they believed more than Jesus. Having beheld his glory, they found themselves running into God's glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said it should not be.”¹

After reflecting on these moments, Taylor said, “I realized just how little interest I had in defending Christian beliefs. The parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the Church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts. ‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. Behold the Lamb of God. Behold, I stand at the door and knock...’ Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief.”

Today we struggle with our isolation, we see our economies dwindle into nothing, and our frontline workers toil away at keeping us safe. Some are itching to get back to work, while stimulus packages seek to provide support. And then we have these interesting folks (I'm being generous here) who are protesting that their freedoms are impinged upon. We have world leaders picking fights with countries, so how could some not doubt in this climate? This climate of Chaos? This climate of fear?

I think the Christian, now more than ever, has the responsibility to model best practices that shape our faith and community. Thomas was not a villain, but rather a hero. He was smart enough to question, and he did so not in isolation but in the presence of community. The great CS Lewis once wrote:

¹ *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (Canterbury Press, 2013), 110.

When we Christians behave badly, or fail to behave well, we are making Christianity unbelievable to the outside world. The wartime posters told us that Careless Talk costs Lives. It is equally true that Careless Lives cost Talk. Our careless lives set the outer world talking; and we give them grounds for talking in a way that throws doubt on the truth of Christianity itself.”²

Now is our time to come together as a community. In the face of doubt, now is the time to set the example. As new life springs forth from the ground, we can find inspiration as we seek an end to this virus.

George Harrison of the Beatles in his song “Here Comes the Sun” reflects on the new life and inspiration that the seasons of this world can bring. And I end with it today saying:

Here comes the sun, doo
 here comes the sun
 And I say it’s all right
 Little darling, it’s been a long cold lonely winter
 Little darling, it feels like years since it’s been here
 Here comes the sun, here comes the sun
 And I say it’s all right

Little darling, the smiles returning to the faces
 Little darling, it seems like years since it’s been here
 Here comes the sun, here comes the sun
 And I say it’s all right³

AMEN.

² *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins Edition, 2001) 207.

³ Apple Music, EMI, London, 1969.