

Easter 2 Year C—John 20:19-31 April 11, 2010

We have all heard the expression “Doubting Thomas” and have perhaps used it ourselves. To the best of my understanding, Thomas was not really different from the other disciples; he simply received the news of Jesus’ resurrection later. Recall that when the women returned from the tomb and told Peter and John that it was empty, they couldn’t really believe it. They had to see the tomb for themselves. Then on Easter night, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the same upper room where they had eaten the last supper. Jesus’ risen presence showed the disciples the wound in Jesus’ side where the spear had pierced it. They saw the wounds from the nails in his hands. He spoke to them and even ate a piece of fish to show that he was really alive. Then they believed.

For some reason, Thomas was not present in the upper room that Easter night. Perhaps he was the kind of person who needed to process his grief by himself. Although I am not a great fan of e-mail, I must say it is easier in modern times to inform those who are not physically present about what is going on. But Thomas wasn’t there. He missed the grand Terce Conference. He missed coffee hour. He didn’t have time to absorb the news, let alone gain any personal experience that would help him believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. When he heard the fantastic news, Thomas’s famous reply was “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.” It seems to me that Thomas’s response was normal. Even under more ordinary circumstances, second and third hand information is often unreliable. Certainly if I had heard such a fantastic claim as a dead man rising from the tomb, I would want first-hand proof.

Faith is not easy. I tell the story of the man who was a mountain climber. One day he climbed a particularly difficult slope. He found himself on a sheer slope holding on to just a single branch growing out of the side of the cliff. “God, are you there?” he called out. The answer that came was “Yes, just have faith.” “Is there anyone else there?”

One commentator I read pointed out the important difference between doubt and unbelief. The unbeliever is one who is closed. The unbeliever won’t believe. He or she is obstinate and content with living in darkness. I think we all know what it is like to try to communicate with a close-

minded person. He simply cannot receive new information. The doubter has a more creative angle of vision. Frederich Beuchner says “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.” When a person doubts, questions, and debates, they are open to the possibility of growth and transformation. The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. Before each stage of growth, we have an uncomfortable period of doubt. Most of us Sisters do a certain amount of spiritual direction, whether in a formal sense or an informal sense. Sometimes I find people seek spiritual direction because they feel called to make a step in their lives, but doubt that they are hearing the call correctly. For about 4 years, I worked with a woman who had been raised in a strict Christian Fundamentalist family. She is an intelligent woman and had started to doubt the biblical literalism that her church taught. She started to seek out churches like the Episcopal church which allow for more liberal thought. Her family was horrified and things became very tense. Her brother, who had become a minister in the Fundamentalist church, told her she was going to Hell. This woman and I spent many sessions together looking at different approaches to the Bible and theology. I lent her my Marcus Borg books. Marcus Borg is one of my favorite writers because he bridges the gap between scholars and ordinary church-goers. Borg teaches his students and readers to look for the truth that can lie deeper than fact. Truth can often be found in mythology rather than dry historical reporting. Basically, the Bible is true and some things happened. The directee was thrilled at the new world that was opening up to her. But still, she had lingering doubts. It took years to build the strength to hold to her own faith. I saw doubt as having a positive place in this woman’s spiritual evolution. Truth is discovered; it cannot be manufactured or imposed from the outside. Checking out evidence is basic to the process of coming to an authentic conclusion that can serve as a stable anchor in spiritual life.

The most beautiful part of the story of Thomas is that when Jesus appeared to Thomas, Thomas knelt down before Jesus and uttered one of the strongest affirmations of faith in all of scripture: “My Lord and my God!” A man of unbelief or prejudice would not have wanted to be confused by truth. Because Thomas was a man of doubt rather than unbelief, he had the capacity to change his mind when presented with proper evidence.

There was an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. Supposing he had tried to squelch his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. He would then never really still his doubts. Thomas was not the kind of man who could rattle off a creed without understanding what it means. He

had to be sure. It is through honest questioning that real faith is born. It is through creative doubt that solid certainty emerges. Note that when Thomas expressed his doubt, Jesus did not censure him, but made available to him exactly what he needed for faith. Tennyson wrote: “There lives more faith in honest doubt/Believe me, than in half the creeds.” (Nevertheless, the Nicene Creed follows this homily). When a person, like Thomas, fights his way through his doubts, in the end he is also like Thomas in that he attains a certainty that would not be possible if he had taken an unthinking approach.

In the Episcopal church, we sometimes hear people brag that we are a denomination that doesn't require us to leave our brains at the church door. Well, in every religious tradition it is stressed that God is not found through the intellect. God is found through personal experience. It was personal experience that turned Jesus' rather wimpy and uncomprehending band of disciples into a strong community that built the early church. We had an example of their courage from the reading from Acts: The temple police had brought them to the council, who had given them strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus. They had disobeyed the council and retorted, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” It is personal experience that enables us to commit to a life-style of spiritual practice for life. Then what is the place of the intellect? The intellect examines, questions, doubts, affirms, leads the way to a place where one can be open to the possibility of authentic faith. The intellect asks, “What is real or eternal and what is only transitory? What is really worth giving my life to? What matters in the long run? A strong intellect can put us in a place where faith can grow. May the doubts we all feel from time to time lead to a stronger faith.