

**Easter 2**  
**Acts 4:32-35      1 John 1:1-2:2      John 20:19-31**  
**Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco**  
**April 8, 2018**

**The Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt**

In the name of the risen Christ, Amen.

From our Easter pinnacle we now journey through the valley of doubt. All that the disciples had given themselves to bring about, had seemingly fallen apart. While they are in hiding, Jesus comes to them: to bestow peace, reassurance, and the Holy Spirit that will guide and sustain them in his absence.

We don't know where Thomas had gone after the Crucifixion. From clues to his personality earlier in the Gospel, it must have signaled for him a tragic and final event. What the Gospel does tell us is that the other disciples find him, and that *Thomas comes back*. The bonds of friendship and love he had experienced in the beloved community were more powerful than his despair. This in itself is an Easter message: Jesus Christ had transformed their hearts, to the point that they wanted to sustain their community even without his physical presence. Gathered in that upstairs room, no one expected Jesus to reappear--least of all Thomas.

This time Jesus comes for Thomas, meeting him in his doubt and his desire for tangible proof, or certainty. In certainty, our minds are clear. We know what we have experienced, or where we stand, and what it is right or true. But certainty also can close us to other ideas or understandings. In certainty, there is no room for doubt--or for belief--or for faith. Something is, or it isn't. Although Thomas *wants* certainty, he actually stops short of it by not needing to touch Jesus' wounds before exclaiming, "My Lord and my God!" He therefore *does* believe.

The Jewish Christian community of John's gospel was especially challenged to show certainty, or at least strong evidence that Jesus had been resurrected. One Johannine scholar notes that the story of Thomas' doubt and belief helped refute the idea that the disciples had simply seen a ghost.<sup>1</sup> The resurrection was indeed much more than that. John's entire gospel sought to demonstrate the signs of divine incarnation through every step of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and also to affirm the faith of later generations who would not have been eye witnesses. One needn't touch or see to believe.

When Jesus said, "Do not doubt but believe," he wasn't encouraging us to believe mindlessly whatever comes our way. Rather, he was urging us not to become an 'unbeliever;' the implication being that perhaps, after the Crucifixion, Thomas was moving in that direction.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' words were also warning us to not let doubt take over to the point that it kills our desire to understand, perhaps at a deeper level, where authentic belief can take root.

It's easy to doubt. To want evidence is basic to human reason. Doubt is also absolutely necessary to both belief and faith. When we doubt, we have the opportunity to explore a somewhat different or deeper understanding of God and our faith than we had held. In this way, doubt is vital to discerning what we

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kysar, *John*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986, p.306.

<sup>2</sup> Kysar, pp.306-07.

actually *do* believe. In my experience, doubts sometimes have been signals that I needed to ponder the direction I was taking, or thinking, either to affirm it with deeper conviction or to make a change.

A young woman I'll call Alice was going through a rough spot in her life. A friend invited her to go along to an evening gathering of a group she had encountered. Alice went, thinking that a change of scenery would be good for her. The gathering was hosted by a controversial Christian group that, in a bygone era, might have been referred to as a cult. Alice became involved with it. When I began researching the group as part of my graduate work, Alice told me how grateful she was for her faith community because they never allowed her to be alone. She was weak in her faith, she explained; and when she was alone, doubts would enter her mind. In her group, doubt was considered an act of Satan. This was *not* what Jesus had intended by the words, "do not doubt."

At other times, doubt has been more about having outgrown an understanding of faith, or about being challenged to believe or accept something that one does not feel is right or true. While I was in graduate school, a Humanist Association was formed at Harvard. Curious, I began attending the meetings from time to time, fascinated by how much the participants talked about God. Most were certain that God did not exist and they spoke at-length as to why they did not believe. One evening the famous psychologist B.F. Skinner, then in his eighties, walked onto stage and told his story of why he didn't believe in God. As a child, he had attended a very conservative Presbyterian church where he was not allowed to question anything about faith. At age nine, his silenced questions had hardened into doubts so strong that he walked out of church and out of religion altogether. As he spoke, I heard an understanding of God that had never grown beyond the level of that frustrated child who had walked out. How many have left their religion because they could not express their questions or doubts, or be supported in exploring them in ways that might deepen their faith?

On Easter, our Rector David (Erickson) preached about resurrection from the graves we dig for ourselves. Both cynicism and gullibility can become graves when we let either doubt (about faith, about one another, about oneself) or unquestioned belief get the upper hand and control us. Jesus was urging Thomas not to give into the *consequences* of doubt, or let it destroy the ability to believe. This Lent, a colleague gave me a small figurine of Thomas, holding a scroll saying, "My Lord and my God," which I keep on my desk as an important reminder not to become *addicted* to doubt or skepticism.

When the disciple Thomas came back, he encountered the risen Christ. His faith was resurrected. So can ours be as well. Sometimes resurrection comes through struggle to find a deeper understanding of God that will sustain us during times of difficulty--a struggle that may involve study and learning, but also may involve encounter with others, and with the inner life.

B.F. Skinner never went back to church, but he did become chaplain of the Humanist Association. Even humanists need pastoral care, and Skinner felt that call. Here is one of the mysteries of God's grace: God works through us to care for one another even if we have rejected God. God's love is that profound.

God works through our doubts and through our unbelief to offer inspiration and hope for others. The late Stephen Hawking, a self-professed atheist, contributed to physics and cosmology in ways that have deepened understanding and also wonder at the complexity of the universe. This has invited many of us into an ever more profound perception of the nature of God, and the capacity of God to move within and beyond the imaginable. Moreover, Hawking's persistence despite his extreme physical disability has inspired yet others who have been disabled or not.

Hawking was one whose *actual* belief in matters of faith or doubt was known to God alone. He felt that his mental focus needed to be clearly scientific, and that matters of faith would muddy his thinking. Indeed, if he had begun to talk publicly about God and faith, the focus would have shifted from away his scientific contributions. As he once told a journalist, "If I say I believe in God, everyone will immediately claim that I believe in the same God they believe in...So I won't say at all."<sup>3</sup>

What matters is where our *heart* is, even if we hold different beliefs, harbor doubts, or profess unbelief. Belief occurs with the mind and with the heart. Some may believe with their mind but not their heart. Others may believe with their heart, even as their mind may harbor questions, doubts, or areas of unbelief. Our heart is what helps us care and support one another, and allows God to work within and through us. As one pastor has said, "If we don't have any doubts we're probably not taking the [gospel] story seriously enough."<sup>4</sup> Doubts raise questions that invite new understanding and belief to take root.

When we strive for deeper belief and faith, we are strengthened in our ability to be a guiding and sustaining force for others during times of difficulty or tragedy, as well as to be guided and sustained ourselves. As the body of Christ, we *can* help transform the heart of the world, which is the goal of authentic life through God's redeeming love.<sup>5</sup>

What is an area of faith where you have struggled with spiritual doubt? What do you need to ponder or explore, or that would help you come to a point where you too might exclaim, "My Lord and my God"?

---

<sup>3</sup> John Martin, "Stephen Hawking, RIP." *The Living Church* March 20, 2018, p.7. Or. <https://livingchurch.org/2018/03/20/stephen-hawking-rip/>

<sup>4</sup> David Lose, "Easter 2 C: Blessed Doubt." March 29, 2016. <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/03/easter-2-c-blessed-doubt/>

<sup>5</sup> Kysar, p.309.