

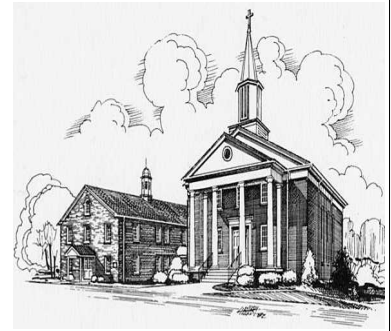
The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday of Easter

Year A

RCL

1 Peter 1:3-9 Psalm 16 John 20:19-31



The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 16 Page 599, BCP

Conserva me, Domine

1 Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you; I have said to the LORD, “You are my Lord, my good above all other.”

2 All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, upon those who are noble among the people.

3 But those who run after other gods shall have their troubles multiplied.

4 Their libations of blood I will not offer, nor take the names of their gods upon my lips.

5 O LORD, YOU are my portion and my cup; it is you who uphold my lot.

6 My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; indeed, I have a goodly heritage.

7 I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel; my heart teaches me, night after night.

8 I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not fall.

9 My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope.

10 For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let

your holy one see the Pit.

11 You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

1 Peter 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable

and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on the day of Resurrection, 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.

SERMON

Today's text is one of the best known in John's Gospel. It's where we get the phrase "Doubting Thomas". The way you've heard it all your life, I think, is as a sort of parable about doubt diluting faith. Jesus appeared to the Disciples at a time when Thomas, an inordinately stubborn and hard-headed sort of fellow, wasn't there. When Thomas returns, they tell him that they have seen the Lord, but he doesn't believe them and insists on proof, in the form of an examination of the wounds of Jesus, before he'll believe. A week later, Jesus appears to them again, this time including Thomas. Thomas' doubt is swept away and he proclaims, "My Lord and my God!" Poor Thomas gets a bum rap if you ask me and we get a bum rap from this version of the story because his problem wasn't doubt, and the Greek text doesn't say that it was, as we'll see.

The three little words Christians of the 21st Century have the most trouble with aren't "I love you" or "Faith, Hope and Charity." They are "Faith, Belief and Doubt". They get all munged up together like an over-cooked stew, until you can't tell the potatoes from the carrots. This is A Bad Thing, because if we don't understand faith, belief and doubt, we'll never be able to get past fear, uncertainty and dread.

Today is the second Sunday of Easter. In the church calendar, Easter isn't just one Sunday. It's the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost when we remind ourselves how the new church came to be, and reacquaint ourselves with the foundations upon which that church was built. Two of those foundations are belief and faith. Faith and belief aren't the same thing. Before the new church could act in faith, it had to believe the Good News that Jesus was raised from the dead.

“Belief” means a mental acceptance of some proposition as true. I believe that the people who design airplanes know what they are doing. I don’t personally have any idea how to build an airplane, but despite my ignorance, I **believe** that the people who design and build airplanes know what they are doing.

“Faith” is the ability to act upon our beliefs. It’s very like trust. If I didn’t believe that the people who design airplanes knew what they were doing, I would not have the faith to get on one. In the same way, if the new church didn’t come to believe that Christ had been raised from the dead, they’d never have sufficient courage to leave the locked room where we find them all hunkered down in today’s text in faith and enter the missionary field.

The third little word that Christians of the 21st Century have trouble with is “doubt”. I’ve lost track of the num-

ber of people who have told me how troubled they are by doubt. They doubt that God “really” exists. They doubt that Jesus “really” was raised from the grave. From time to time, they doubt pretty much everything the church teaches, and that causes them endless shame and difficulty. Here’s something surprising: I’m OK with the doubting. I’m not OK with the shame. The opposite of faith isn’t doubt. The opposite of faith is “fear”.

Here’s what I mean: I believe that the airplane I’m about to get on is going to lift up in the air, however improbable that may seem on the face of it, and will deliver me safely to my destination, albeit without my luggage more times than not. Even though I do believe that the thing will take off and land safely, I still have doubts about it. If I had never seen one or heard of one, I have to tell you — that idea might be a pretty hard

sell. A honking big aluminum tube is going to hurtle me safely through the air?

But acting in faith on my belief I set aside my fears, and buckle the seat belt when the pretty lady tells me to do so. And there's the crux of the matter. Because I do believe that the airplane will transport me safely, even though I have doubts about it, I get on. That's an act of faith and through faith I overcome my fears. The only way I could do that is because I have faith in the accuracy of my beliefs about airplanes. That's not really so strange. We go through our day acting in faith about all manner of things that we have doubts about, airplanes included. If we can deal confidently with technology about which we may have some doubt without drowning in shame that we aren't good airplane passengers, why do we struggle so over the doubts that inevitably crop up in matters of religious faith and imagine that we

are, therefore, bad Christians?

It's no surprise to me that Thomas didn't believe his brothers when they told him of a meeting with the risen Christ. That's a pretty outrageous thing to say and I dare say if you hadn't heard the story every Eastertide since you were able to hear it you'd have trouble with it, too. Telling someone that his friend, who has recently died in a very public and verifiable way, has been raised from the dead is an extraordinary claim. Anybody but the most credulous would want to see some evidence of that. Talk is cheap. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Maybe Mary saw the gardener. Maybe the other disciples had some sort of mass hysteria. There is a lot of room to question what might have happened before Thomas could settle down to an explanation as outlandish as the one he's being offered. Thomas isn't extraordinarily skeptical. He's behaving in

a very reasonable way, and no differently than the other disciples behaved when Mary told them what she had seen.

The more serious difficulty with the way we've always viewed this story is that Thomas' problem isn't really doubt at all. The Greek word, *apistos*, translated as "doubt" in the New Revised Standard translation of this passage, means something more like "faithlessness" in Greek. The King James translation actually gets the meaning of *apistos* more accurately than does the New Revised Standard:

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless [*apistos*], but believing.

Thomas' problem wasn't doubt. It was faithlessness. He lacked faith because he had not yet come to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. To maintain

that any doubt somehow trumps faith is to be awfully cavalier about the meaning of these two important words.

The simple truth is that faith implies doubt. Doubt means that you are engaging your beliefs. You are testing them in the scale of your God-given reason and weighing out your beliefs. I can sing “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so” until I am sick to death of it, but I won’t be anywhere near as convinced as I will be by weighing my own experiences and seeing for myself how God intervenes in my life.

Faithless Thomas can not make the necessary leap of faith — his fear overwhelms him. He sets out just exactly what he would have to see in order to be convinced that Jesus has returned from the dead.

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.

Jesus takes him up on it, point for point. If that is what Thomas needs in order to overcome his fear and step forward in faith, that is precisely what Jesus will provide. When Jesus meets Thomas, doubts and all, he tells him, “Be not faithless, but believing.” Jesus is not condemning Thomas for doubting. Jesus is concerned that Thomas be able to live in faith, and has met him where he is to provide that which he needs to do so. The fascinating thing about what happens next is that there is no account of Thomas doing that which Jesus invited. We aren’t told that Thomas makes a careful examination of the wounds of Jesus then says, “Son of a gun! You WERE raised from the dead!” Jesus merely offers Himself and, “. . .Thomas answered and said unto him, ‘My LORD and my God.’” Jesus’ willingness to meet him

where he was with what he needed was enough to convince Thomas to believe in the Risen Christ, and, having believed, to faithfully follow Him. That's the difference between belief and faith. Once we believe, that is, once we accept the truth of an assertion, then we can faithfully overcome our fears and undertake the consequences of that belief. Once we believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, then and only then can we begin to faithfully follow the teachings of the Christ.

I want to suggest to you, church, that God is pursuing you just as He pursued Thomas, and is anxious to provide to you whatever you need in order to believe.

That's a heady thought. The creator of everything, who walked out from where there was no place to be, stood where there was no place to stand, lifted a handful of that which wasn't there, hung it where there was no place to hang it and told it to stay there is pursuing you.

He wants to enter into a relationship of love with you,
and He is willing to bring you what you need to do that.

What do you need, church? What do you need?

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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