

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on the Second Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

About Doubts

I remember recently a dear friend having some disturbing health problems. He very nervously went to see his doctor for some tests—one of which was a biopsy. After nearly a week of agonizing waiting for the results, the doctor called... Our friend could feel his heart beating like an oil rig when he picked up the phone. "I have good news," said the doctor. "Your biopsy was negative, and all of the other tests indicate that you are in good health and have nothing to fear... The man sat there, holding that phone, quite speechless. Finally he said—what any of us might say at such a moment—"Doctor, are you absolutely sure? You don't think they could have misread the lab reports, do you?"

You see, the news was too good to be true, and at first our friend doubted what the doctor had told him.

The Gospel lesson for this morning (John 20: 19-31) is about the reaction of the Apostle Thomas when he was given news that seemed to him too good to be true. We often call this Apostle "doubting Thomas" because he didn't believe them when the others told him that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Little wonder. He had seen the Lord crucified. It is evident from the text that Thomas knew about the wounds, including the one in Jesus' side. He had seen his Lord die on that cross and he knew that his body had been laid in a cave with a great stone rolled across the entrance. It does not surprise us that when Thomas was told about the Lord's resurrection, he said that he would not believe until he could see the mark of the nails and touch his wounds.

Thomas has always been a favorite of mine. I was ordained to the priesthood on December 21, which happens to be St. Thomas' Day. The ordination took place in the Virgin Islands on the island of St. Thomas. For these reasons, I have considered Thomas my patron saint.

I also like Thomas because he was so honest about his doubts.

I have yet to meet a person who does *not* have doubts.

Throughout the years, I have had any number of people come to me to talk about their doubts. One that I remember best was a man who came to tell me that he was worried about his marriage. He wasn't sure he was a good and loving husband, and he doubted that his wife loved him... Who hasn't had doubts like that? Doubt is a part of our every day life.

There is no area where doubt can be stronger than in the realm of religious faith... And why not? Religions tend to promulgate, we preach about, things that are hard to believe.

Maybe you know the story about the very devout lady that had to travel a lot for her business, and she did a lot of flying. She was nervous about flying, and she always took her Bible so she could read it to calm her nerves while she was in flight. One time, a man in the next seat noticed this and he gave a little chuckle, and said to the lady, "You don't really believe all that stuff in there do you?" She replied, "Of course I do. It's the Bible." The man said, "Well, what about the guy that was swallowed by that whale?" She replied, "Oh, Jonah. Yes, I believe that. It's in the Bible." He asked, "And so how do you suppose he survived all that time inside the whale?" The lady answered, "I really don't know. I guess when I get to heaven I'll ask him." "What if he isn't in heaven?" the man asked. "Then you can ask him," replied the lady...

When the apostles told Thomas that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, quite naturally he found that hard to believe. People still find it hard to believe. And that's o. k.... I agree with Tennyson when he wrote that "there lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half of the creeds."

And one rather admires G. K. Chesterton's little character, John Grubby...

"John Grubby who was short and stout
and troubled with religious doubt,
refused about the age of three
to sit upon the curate's knee."

We have a prayer in the baptismal service in which we ask God to grant the person being baptized "an *inquiring* and discerning heart." (BCP, pg. 308) This is a good prayer because it assumes that to have an inquiring heart is to live out our humanity, and there is nothing wrong in having questions in matters of faith.

Which brings me to the second point of this sermon: I am troubled by people who have all the answers. Every now and then we meet people who call themselves Christians. That is "Christian" with a capital "C"! These are not little "c" Christians like most of us. I am talking about people who claim to be born-again, baptized-in-the-Spirit Christians. They tell us that they have given their hearts to Jesus. That's fine. I have no problem with that, but I'm troubled when they tell me that they have no further questions.

They promise to pray for those of us who do have questions. Furthermore, they have no doubts about anything in the Bible. Every word of it (from Genesis to Revelation) is unerringly true—no question about it.

A young boy was asked by such a person if he was ready to give his heart to Jesus. "Christianity is a continual joy," said the person. "Look at your sister Sarah. See how much that dear girl *enjoys* her religion!" "Sarah may enjoy her religion," replied the youngster, "but nobody *else* in the house does! "

I suspect that those who claim to have no doubts about matters of faith are not being honest with themselves. I wonder if they don't sweep their innermost fears and doubts under the rug.

They also have a kind of pious arrogance about them that isn't very Christ like. Didn't we fall in love with Mother Teresa when she told us of her doubts?

Years ago I was preaching in the parish where I was serving at the time. The gospel lesson was from Matthew, Chapter 14. It was about the time Jesus walked on the water.

I said I knew that some people had difficulty believing stories like that. I said that if you had doubts about Jesus actually walking on water, you could interpret the story symbolically. I reminded my congregation that we learn from the book of Genesis that when God created the world he caused his Spirit to move across the face of the waters. (Gen. 1 :2) I suggested that Matthew might have told the story of Jesus walking on water to remind his readers that Jesus brings new life to God's creation.

I preached this sermon in mid August, deep in the heart of the dog days, and everyone was a little edgy that morning. At the end of the service this woman was waiting for me. She reprimanded me for preaching such a sermon. She informed me that she had absolutely no doubt that Jesus did walk on water, and that she was going to start praying for my conversion to a true and undoubting faith. Until such conversion happened, she was not going to attend any more services at that church, and if this didn't happen soon, she would speak to the bishop about having me dismissed.

This woman may have been justified in the things that she said to me, but somehow it didn't come across as being very Christ like.

Having all the answers can cause a kind of arrogance in us that creates barriers rather than building bridges.

When Thomas was honest about his doubts, I believe he was speaking for all of us. He is called Thomas Didimus, that is, Thomas the Twin. There is no mention of his twin brother or sister anywhere in the Scriptures. Maybe the name "Didimus" means that Thomas is twin to all of us, in the sense that we all quite naturally have doubts and questions to ask. We all would find it much easier to believe if we could touch the wounds of Christ—or as we like to say, "Seeing is believing."

Because the Lord knew about Thomas's doubts, he came back 8 days later. This time Thomas was there. Jesus said to him, "Put your finger here, and see my hands, reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." (John 20:27)

If Thomas had not been honest about his doubts, that would never have happened. I believe this is true of all of us. If we are the twins of this doubting Apostle and honestly confess it, if we are humble about our religious faith, I am persuaded that we also will be able to see and to touch the wounds of the risen Christ.

Amen.