

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Second Sunday of Easter
St. John 20:19-31

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

One of my professors in seminary was a German by the name of Manfred Hoffmann. He was professor of church history and hermeneutics and, primarily, a scholar of Martin Luther. I vaguely recall him telling the story of a distressed woman who had written to Martin Luther for some reassurance. She was desperate to have the assurance of salvation and no matter how much she tried to accept the concept of “justification by grace through faith,” she had doubts. It’s been 45 years since he told us that story so I may not remember Luther’s response perfectly, but it went something like this: “Just throw yourself on the mercy of God and stop your blathering!” You have to excuse Luther of his insensitivity. He was a monk and theologian not inclined to being pastoral. It was his brashness, after all, which launched the Reformation.

To say or think that faithful followers of Jesus Christ are those who can honestly say they have no doubt, is to affirm something I don’t believe exists. Theologian Paul Tillich maintained that doubt is part of faith itself. The two go hand in hand. If you are without doubt it is because you are without faith. The opposite of faith, you see, is not doubt; it is indifference. Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian pastor and author, was not as profound a theologian as Paul Tillich, but he was a better writer. In his book *Wishful Thinking*, he writes, “doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

So, if doubt is a part of faith, why do we keep giving Thomas such a hard time? “Doubting Thomas” we’ve named him... and we don’t mean it in a nice way. We mean it in as a contrast with the “believing” disciples, forgetting, of course, that they had had the exact experience that Thomas said he needed—they had seen the wounds for themselves. Here’s how John tells the story. It was evening and I’m assuming they’ve gathered at table for the evening meal. Being religious Jews there were prayers and blessings. There may have been a remembering of how they had shared that special meal with Jesus before His crucifixion or, before that, on the shore of the Jordan with 5,000 others. Grief makes you do that—remember those moments with the one now missing. Suddenly, Jesus is present in spite of

the fact that the door were shut and locked. He greets them with the most absurd of greetings: “Peace be with you.” I can assure you that what they were feeling was not peace. The doors were locked because they were afraid for their lives. The authorities could have decided to round up all of those in Jesus’ movement. Jesus shows them His wounds. “See,” He seems to be saying, “the world has done its worst... but I have overcome the world.” So He says it again because they didn’t get it the first time, “Peace be with you.”

Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not present, and when the other disciples tell him about their experience, he does not believe them and won’t believe them unless he sees for himself. It’s now a week later and the disciples are again in a shut room. Jesus appears and again says, “Peace be with you.” After He invites Thomas to touch His wounds, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” His words are the classic early Christian affirmation of Easter.

But I want to be clear with you. These words are not simply an affirmation of belief, but an affirmation of renewed loyalty. Thomas was never a “shrinking violet.” He’s the one who, when Jesus turned His face to go to Jerusalem, exclaimed, “then we will go and die with Him.” To affirm Jesus as Lord and God was risky business—for it meant that the Emperor was not! Caesar Augustus, Tiberius, and on down to Domitian, whose reign was roughly contemporary with the writing of John’s Gospel, all required their subjects to address them as, “Our Lord and god.” To give that title to Christ meant you were living in God’s kingdom and committing yourself to its values of justice, love, peace, and sharing what you have with others. You were no longer living under Caesar and adopting the values of his kingdom. St. Luke gives us a snapshot of how this community of followers looked in our reading this morning:

“The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each

as any had need” (4.32, 34).

They acted as if the kingdom of God were here! And it was.

Seeing the wounds of Christ is an important part of John’s Easter story. Wounded people respond with their heart to a wounded God; sacrifice for the sake of love to that God; respond with loyalty and allegiance to the one who lives and has overcome the world. When that happens, faith is no longer just belief in a set of doctrines and dogmas, but attentiveness and nurturing in relationship within the community of faith.

Thomas made the great confession, “My Lord and my God,” not as an intellectual assent but as an affirmation of the relationship he had with the Lord and his fellow apostles. I’m glad he did what he did. Nowhere in this reading is Thomas condemned for his doubt. His doubt is not an indication of a lack of faith, but an indication that he was not indifferent—this was a matter of great importance to Thomas. The indifferent don’t struggle with doubts because they just don’t care. Thy kingdom fade, Thy will be gone!

Thomas cared. Yet, even after these words of Thomas’s Easter affirmation, Jesus reserves a greater blessing for those who have not seen yet have come to believe.