

April 3 2016

Scripture Lessons ~

I Corinthians 15: 19-26

John 20:19-31

Sermon *I Doubt It*

As I was mentioning before when I was a child my grandfather taught my sister and I to play a card game called, *I Doubt it*. I can't remember any more the exact rules of the game but I do remember that it was a sort of bluffing game, when the other player would try to get you to believe something about his or her hand during the course of the game. If you were lead to believe the wrong things, you would of course lose the hand so you had to be very careful about the things that you did come to believe or if you were uncertain about the other person's hand and you wanted to call his/her bluff you simply say, "I doubt it". And then that person would have to show the hand in question of course anything like that you took a fifty chance if you win or if you lose but doubting the game was a very positive thing and it definitely was the pathway to further knowledge if you were going to win or lose.

Through the centuries the church the view of what this disciple Thomas that we heard about this morning, was not been very complementary to him chiefly because of this one point, Thomas doubted Jesus in this one encounter that was in the Gospel lesson for today. Most of our negative thoughts about Thomas however are contributed to the fact that we don't know very much about him other than this. If we look at what we do know about him from the Gospels I think we will find him to be a person rather of great faith and someone whom we might want to model our Christian lives as we walk our pathways to Jesus. We are primarily indebted to the writer of John's Gospel for the things that we do know about Thomas.

The first meeting with him comes in the eleventh chapter in John's Gospel. Mary and Martha as you know lived in Bethany which was in Judea had a brother named Lazarus—you know that story, he lived, was ill and he died. Jesus wants to go there to be of help, the disciples are fully aware that would put his very life in danger so they are reluctant for Jesus to go and they were fearful for themselves. Strangely it is Thomas who rallied the other disciples by saying these words, "Let us go also that we might die with him." We can certainly see by this of the devotion which Thomas had for Jesus. He certainly wasn't a coward as some people might come to think.

The next time that we meet Thomas is in the fourteen chapter of John's Gospel. He did not understand the purpose of Jesus intended death and he not only had

difficulty with it but questioned Jesus about it. Jesus had tried to explain to the disciples when he died he would be returning to God. He also wanted to make it clear and plain that he was going ahead to prepare a place for them. But all that Thomas could comprehend was the finality of Jesus' death. Thus Thomas says these words, "Lord we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way." It is clear that Thomas has an inquiring mind but more than this he is secure enough in Jesus' love to be willing to ask the hard questions in life. Honest questioning is only possible when there is great trust and great devotion in any given relationship. Thomas must have had this kind of rapport with Jesus, otherwise he would not have felt the freedom to question him as did.

The third meeting with Thomas comes in today's section that Pat shared with us from St. John. We are told that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, which was that first Easter morning, the first day of the week that we celebrated last Sunday. In the evening, Jesus appeared to the ten remaining disciples, since Judas was no longer with them and Thomas for some reason was not there. Unfortunately, Thomas having not seen the risen Jesus or heard him speak the words of reassurance found it hard to accept what he was told although we could well imagine that Thomas desperately wanted to accept what he was told. For him, Jesus death was cruel and it was final; and so he says, "Unless I see in his hand the prints of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later when Thomas was with the ten disciples in the room in that same house Jesus appeared before them. Jesus said those wonderful words, "Peace be with you." And then he said to Thomas, Go ahead, put your fingers here, see my hand, take my hand place it on my side, and be not faithless but be believing." And Thomas answered with these words, "My Lord and my God." My Lord and my God. And Jesus said to him, "Do you believe because you have seen me; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

It is because of Thomas' doubt, I think, about Jesus resurrection that he has received what I consider to be a bad rap over the years. It is because of this one incident in his life, he has received the nick-name Doubting Thomas. Sometimes we like to call people, doubting Thomas, who cynical or skeptical or faithless. Thomas is not only misunderstood but he has also has been maligned in Christian history. I content that only through honest sincere questioning can faith and progress be accomplished. Doubt and faith are not incompatible. They are in fact very much linked together in our journey of faith. Doubt I think is a gateway, the opening by which the individual comes to greater and greater faith. First of all doubt is what has made it possible for humanity to progress as far as it has. It is as much a part, the necessity in the heart of very maturing human being as is our food, our drink, our oxygen. The mysterious of our universe has been unraveled because men and women have been willing to question, asking incessantly those

journalist questions which we were taught in school-where, how, why, what, and when. The Bible is the record of this constant pilgrimage of those who in every single age, who were willing and had been willing to question their faith, to search for the will of God in their lives and in the world around them. The religious history of our forefathers and foremothers give testimony of this fact. Thank goodness they questioned the belief that God require human sacrifices and fortunately with the coming of Jesus somebody questioned that God should be worshipped by the sacrifice of animals. We are indebted by the great prophets Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah who came down on the whole practice of idolatry and sexual abuse and sacrifice. Even the author of the book of Job had the strength to doubt and question why the innocent suffer. Some believed in that time that only the evil suffered and the good were always rewarded and prospered. If you suffered, you were being punished for doing something bad which we all know is not necessarily the case at all. Even Jesus doubted the faith of his own day. It was his questioning that got him into trouble with the Roman authorities. It really upset him when he thought about the small ideas about God that the Pharsees and Sadducee had. It was doubt when Jesus questioned about praying in public, to be seen by others, and encouraged us to pray instead in private. Was it doubt, when he had doubts about the use of the Sabbath when he was criticized for healing on that day? Thanks to doubt old traditions which have had a low view in the priority of humanity in life were challenged and thanks to Jesus for willing confront the status quo. I think it is necessary in every age to question what we as human beings have come believe as true about God. It is not God that changes but thank goodness what humans have come to know and believe has changed. What Thomas did was what any thinking person should and must do.

As William Barkley in his commentary in the Gospel of John said, Thomas had two great virtues. First he absolutely refused to say he understood what he did not understand or believe in what he did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. He would never leave his doubts by pretending his doubts didn't exist. He was not the kind of man who would rattle off a creed without understanding what that creed was all about. The poet Tennyson wrote these words, "There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creed, in other words there is more faith in individuals that persistent in doing a deeper understanding of God than the person that blindly repeats things that have never been thought out or which might not really believe at the time."

Secondly Thomas's other great virtue was that once he had reached the point of understanding in his faith he went the whole way, he was not airing his doubts for the sake for some kind of mental acrobatics. He doubted in words and went on to embrace a deep faith in God and when he did; his surrender was complete. The scriptures record that Thomas was a twin, to whom a twin, we really don't know

but maybe in the larger sense he was a twin to each one of us as followers of Jesus. For who among us has not at some time or other, in the dark of the night said, unless I see, unless I touch, I cannot believe but hopefully, too like our twin Thomas, we can experience the presence of the living Jesus and we can exclaim in the end as Thomas did, My Lord and My God. Amen.