

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 15, 2007

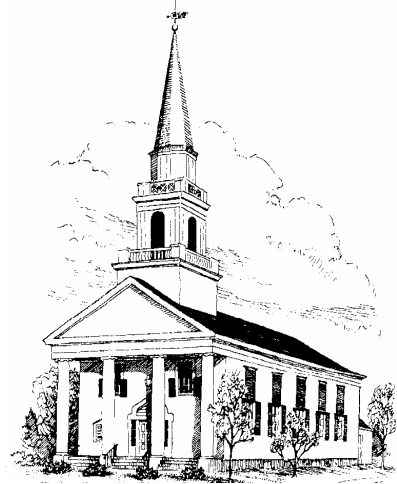
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“How’s Your Doubting Coming?”

Scriptures:

Acts 5:27-32

John 20:19-31



Today is called the Second Sunday of Easter, reminding us that Easter is not a one-Sunday spectacular but a full, rich, and varied season of celebration. We’re going to be in the season we call Eastertide now for a good six weeks! Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

Our first text today, from the book of Acts, shows us a fully empowered and spirit-filled group of disciples—so full of the Good News that they have refused to be quiet about that news in spite of repeated threats by the rulers of the Sanhedrin. There is no doubt at all expressed by any of the disciples as they stand before the powerful authorities of the Temple at Jerusalem. There is no doubt expressed as the disciples boldly declare, for all the world to hear, that God’s love through Jesus Christ is such Good News that they cannot be silent about it; they must proclaim it; they are compelled to share it with others!

Our Gospel text, however, tells us a different story. John’s Gospel tells us what was happening with the disciples on the very first evening of the Resurrection of Christ, on that first Sunday night, as the disciples cowered behind locked doors, hiding from the authorities, filled with fear, not really knowing yet what had really happened to Jesus, and not really experiencing anything but Bad News!

John’s Gospel here reveals a terrified group of disciples huddled quietly and secretly behind locked doors for fear for their lives, a group of folks still shocked and overwhelmed by the enormity of their loss, when suddenly, without any warning the risen Christ appears in their midst. We then hear John’s narrative about two separate appearances of the risen Christ—the first, when the disciple Thomas is not present on that first Easter evening, and the second appearance a week later when the disciple Thomas is present.

Jesus speaks reassuringly in both appearances, with a conventional Jewish greeting, “Peace be with you.” Jesus has come to break into the darkness of their disillusion and their despair. According to John’s rendering of the story, Jesus has also appeared to them to breathe on the disciples and empower them with the Holy Spirit. This scene marks the beginning of the church as a unique body inspired by the same Spirit that was in Jesus. In this very first encounter with the disciples, Jesus empowers them and sends them out. (This is one of the several ver-

sions of the Pentecost event which we will celebrate later on after Eastertide, at the end of May.)

Despite all of the failures, betrayals and denials of the last few days, the risen Christ stands among the disciples with clarity that he wants them to continue the ministry which he began. Jesus stands in their midst and breathes into them the gift of the Spirit. He breathes on them his own ways, his own mind and nature, his own Spirit, and the very Spirit of God. In spite of all that has happened, the disciples hear that the Son of God still wants them to work for him! The risen Christ wants these disciples to spread the Good News!

This is good news for us as well. For no matter how unworthy or unfaithful we are, the message is the same for us: God still trusts us. God still takes us back. God still wants us to carry on the Good News. Through the gift of God's son, we have all been given the Spirit as a gift. God's Spirit is available to each of us, if we can only learn to trust and to believe.

But the text for today doesn't stop there with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our text for today brings us to understand that the disciple Thomas was missing from the room on that first Easter evening. And when the disciple Thomas hears about the appearance of Christ, he is quite clear that he will not believe unless he sees for himself the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands and unless he witnesses for himself the puncture in Jesus' side made by the soldier's spear while his body hung on the cross.

So the writer John goes on to tell us that, a week later when all the disciples and followers were once again gathered, the risen Christ appears to them again, greeting them as before. This time Jesus turns immediately to the disciple Thomas. And speaking as if Jesus had been present when Thomas expressed his disbelief to the other disciples, Jesus invites the disciple to put his finger in the nail hole and his hand in the pierced side. Jesus says gently, "Do not be faithless, but believing." Another translation of this same text reads, "Do not be faithless, but faithful."

Oh, to be full of faith! Isn't that what we would all like to be—full of faith? Wouldn't it be good if we were so full of faith that we would never again fail to believe or have to struggle with doubt? Don't we identify with Thomas here? Don't we, too, yearn for an appearance of the risen Christ in our lives? Like Thomas, we were absent when Jesus breathed on the disciples. We were missing from the line-up when the faith gene was distributed. Don't we wish that, just once, we too could have that proof that would help us tie up all the loose ends of our doubts and make our faith rock solid?

Notice how Jesus doesn't criticize or try to stifle the doubts that the disciple has. Jesus wants us to believe and so he offers him the proof that he said he wanted. We are not actually told if the disciple Thomas actually takes Jesus up on his offer to touch the torn hands or the punctured side. We are simply told that he then says with awe, "My Lord and my God!"

In a flash, the disciple experiences a completely renewed faith. He is suddenly filled with belief so that all he can do is to confess the faith! Oh, how we yearn for such moments of clarity in our faith journeys. How we yearn for that "Yes!" in our lives. Most of us don't come

to belief all at once like the disciple Thomas. Most of us come to faith through a convoluted series of fits and starts, of questions and answers, of glimmers of hope and agonizing periods of doubt and confusion.

Frederick Buechner in his book *Wishful Thinking* has some important commentary on the importance of doubt in our faith formation. He writes:

“Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep! Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Doubts can help us along in our faith journeys. Doubts can inspire us. They can motivate us to re-examine, reappraise, and renew our faith. Doubts can be a creative force for our faith!

Today’s sermon title intentionally calls attention to the idea that doubting is part of our faith. How’s your doubting coming?

Did Easter help inspire you this year to re-think and re-examine where you stand on the resurrection of Jesus? Did the events of this Lent, Holy Week, and Easter push you a bit to wonder about what you really believe and why you believe it? Somewhere along in our religious education, we may have been led to think that having doubts about our faith was a “bad” thing, that doubting wasn’t supposed to be part of a Christian’s faith.

I still remember the time when my daughter, Sarah, when she was just nine came to me as I studied for an exam at Yale Divinity School. Sarah said with great sincerity, “I’m worried because I don’t know what to believe about Jesus. I can’t understand how he could walk on water or how he could do all the things that the Bible says he did. I don’t think I believe enough to call myself a Christian!”

You see, somewhere along the line, even at age nine, she had already gotten the erroneous message that her faith was supposed to be doubt-free! This season of Easter, let’s consider how it is that we come to our faith, how it is that we come to believe, how is it that some Christians seem so very clear about everything, how come I’m still muddling my way along this faith journey business.

Jesus seems to understand that not all who would believe in him would “see” him as the disciple Thomas did. Jesus understood that there are two kinds of vision—a physical vision of the eyes and the spiritual vision of the heart, the vision of faith. Jesus inquires of Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

Here Jesus promises blessing to all those who will not see—either with the eyes or with the heart—but who still believe. Ultimately, each of us must believe what we cannot see with our eyes. Our spiritual vision can be cloudy and full of doubts along the way. The challenge for us is to let the doubts about our faith inspire us to work towards more surety and a more renewed faith

Doubt can be a creative force for us. Doubts can keep us awake and move us along on our faith journeys. Doubts can push us to re-think and reconsider old habits and assumptions about our faith. Doubts can push us along in good and constructive ways.

Doubt for the disciple Thomas was not just mental acrobatics—when he was sure, he was sure! “My Lord and my God!” are not words of one who is only halfway committed. Thomas doubted so he could become sure. If we can muddle our way through our doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, if we can start to see that Jesus shared the gift of the Spirit with us by his life, his death, and his resurrection, if we can move along in our journey so that our doubts inspire our faith to grow, then perhaps we, too, can live lives which are truly lives full of faith, faithful lives!

Buechner again offers us some helpful commentary: “We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it all, as what happens when life ends ... We would be better off to think of it as what happens when life begins.” In other words, to live Eternal Life in the fullest sense is to be with God, as Christ is with us now, and with each other as Christ is with us every day.

Let us go out this week to take our doubts seriously. Let us go out this week to continue to examine our doubts. Let us go out this week ready to renew and revitalize our Easter faith in a Christ who walks with us and moves with us and works through us with every day! Amen.