

Doubting Thomas

A sermon preached by Larry Rotch

at the Episcopal Church of St. John Baptist

in Thomaston, Maine

April 3, 2016

As the luck of the draw, or God's sense of humor, would have it, this is the second time in the last three years that I've preached on Thomas. Last time I talked about bicycles but today I'd like to say a few words about lyres. Lyres as in musical instruments, not politics. But first I want to say a few words about Doubting Thomas himself, because I think he's been badly treated over the years. His refusal to believe in the risen Christ without proof is often seen as a sign of weakness, a lack of faith.

Today's binary, black-and-white society tends to be critical of doubt and uncertainty. Nowadays, shooting from the hip, talking in terms of absolutes, is often considered a virtue, a sign of strength. We criticize as weak those "flip-flopsters" who want to consider before deciding. But is doubt really a bad thing?

In his epic poem, *In Memoriam*, Alfred Lord Tennyson compared the process of exploring doubt to learning how to play the lyre:

"...one indeed I knew

In many a subtle question versed,

Who touched a jarring lyre at first,

But ever strove to make it true:

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,

At last he beat his music out.

There lives more faith in honest doubt,

Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gathered strength,

He would not make his judgment blind,

He faced the spectres of the mind

And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;

And Power was with him in the night,

Which makes the darkness and the light,

And dwells not in the light alone.”

I’ve never tried to play the lyre, but I did take up the guitar in high school. I wanted to play bluegrass, what the old timers used to call Church Picking or bordello music. After buying a \$2 guitar from a friend, I learned the doo-wacka, doo-wacka bluegrass strum, a few chords, and the notes to a couple of simple tunes. At that point I hit a brick wall. My efforts were like Tennyson’s “jarring lyre.” The notes were there but not the music; there was no life, no body to the tune, just “plinkita, plinkita” sounds. Not even a metronome helped. After a month of “plinkita, plinkita,” I began to doubt that I’d ever get it right. Finally one evening I started thinking about a friend who had an old ooghah horn. That thing was really loud, and I wondered if he’d trade his horn for my guitar. I didn’t have a car then, but Mother’s Day was right around the corner, and it occurred to me that it would be a wonderful surprise for her to hit the horn on our ‘52 Plymouth, and instead of the usual

anemic “beep,” that oogah horn would let loose with a blast that could blow the grille off the car. As I was sitting there convincing myself that she’d really love having this gift, I suddenly heard somebody playing Wildwood Flower on the guitar. And it was me. And the tune was alive, it was music, it had body and soul. And I hardly dared to stop playing. I never did get that oogah horn, but I never forgot the moment when Wildwood Flower came to life.

Fighting “honest doubt,” as Tennyson put it, has its rewards, but it’s hard work. Doubting Thomas, by keeping an open mind, confronted his doubt, and was able to be amazed and convinced by the resurrection.

So is doubt really a bad thing? It seems to me that we have three ways of dealing with our doubt. First, we can ignore it without questioning, and glibly say, “Oh yes, I believe,” turn aside and do nothing more.

Second, we can use our doubt to blindly reject the resurrection. We can become like deer, frozen in the headlights of the unknown, fearful and unwilling to move.

But Thomas went the third, more difficult way, and chose to “fight” his honest doubt to seek truth.

Thomas understood that honest doubt is a process, not an event; a verb not a noun; a path to understanding, not an obstacle.

Seeing may have been believing for the disciples - the end of their doubt - but life is more complicated for us, as Jesus points out when He says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

The chicken-and-egg question for us today is this: If we can’t see in order to believe, do we have to believe in order to see?

Personally, I find it hard to completely escape the visual side of things. When I think of God, my mind automatically goes to Michelangelo’s masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. My eyes have programmed my brain to see God as having long white hair, a flowing white beard, and a muscular arm, reaching out, pointing in an imposing way. What more does one need in order to believe?

Likewise, I’ve seen innumerable pictures of Jesus depicted in various racial

forms: the bearded Caucasian from our culture, a Native American Jesus with Navaho bone structure and skin coloration, an African Jesus, and an Oriental Jesus. In the visual sense, we've each seen our own version of Christ.

Don't get me wrong; these images can be extremely powerful and uplifting, but they have down sides as well. If we're not careful they can become shortcuts, a glib form of belief, a plinkita, plinkita that prevents a more complete understanding, a deeper faith.

More important, they can distract us from the reality and immediacy of the divine. As glorious as Michelangelo's masterpiece is, God is up there on the ceiling, not here in front of me. God's finger isn't pointing in my face. There's a feeling of safety in that, a feeling that we're dealing with our faith at arm's length - sort of like texting God instead of talking face to face.

As a mental exercise, suppose that we'd grown up never having seen pictures of God or Jesus. What would He look like in our mind's eye without those images to guide us and influence our thinking? Would we be forced to see Him in a more real way? Would we be forced to see Him as the person sitting beside us this morning? Would we be more inclined to see the Jesus who lives in each of us?

We may not see Jesus the way the disciples did, but we can see the effects of His presence in the beauty that lives in each other.

All this reminds me a little of a physicist studying dark matter, or the Higgs Boson, the so-called "God particle." By definition, we can't see dark matter itself, but we can see it at work, namely in keeping the universe from exploding. I have no idea what Higgs Bosons looks like, though some modern-day Michelangelo has probably drawn a picture of them. Even without that picture, I'm pretty sure that my life would take a turn for the worse if they went away. We may not be able to see Jesus the way the disciples did, but we can see his work in the people and the world around us.

We've been told countless times where to find Jesus. In fact, we sang about it a few weeks ago in St. Patrick's Breastplate with the words, "Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me."

Admitting that Christ might be within me is the hardest part for me. How do I get to that quiet place inside to look for Him? I often end the day with my mind cluttered up by all the things I should

have done but didn't, all the things I did do but shouldn't have, all the things I should have done better but didn't. How can Jesus possibly forgive all that stuff?

And speaking of forgiving, it can be hard to remember that Jesus lives in the neighbor who's dog howls all night; Jesus lives in the surly store clerk; Jesus lives in the cop who gave me a speeding ticket; Jesus even lives in the loony politician I don't agree with. Yet it's our calling to seek out that Jesus, as difficult as it may be.

I'd like to close with a prayer by Thomas Merton, the priest, writer, and mystic. His words are especially appropriate in today's polarized society where fear and doubt make it so hard to see the Christ within each other:

O God, we are one with you. You have made us one with you. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, you dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection.

O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept you, we thank you, and we adore you, and we love you with our whole being, because your being is our being, our spirit is rooted in your spirit.

Fill us with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes you present in the world, and which makes you witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious.

Amen.