

Sermon preached by Larry Rotch April 2012 at St. John's

Faith and Bicycles

The Easter season readings have always been particularly rich and powerful for me, and today's Gospel is no exception. In fact today's reading is really sort of a twofer. First, we have what's often called the Great Commission, where the disciples joyfully recognize the risen Jesus, and Jesus breaths on them, filling them with the Holy Spirit and empowering them for their ministries. And next we're jolted by the famous doubting Thomas passage, where Thomas comes in like the Grinch and won't believe a word of it without proof. There's a ton of sermon material here. You're lucky I'm not long-winded. I think many of the commentaries give Thomas a bad rap. One of them suggests that he was a little slow on the uptake, another describes him as "belligerently pessimistic." Personally, I think that each of us comes to our own understanding of faith, or maybe un-faith, in our own way, depending on who we are and how we think, whether we're a Thomas who wants hard proof, or somebody who accepts faith as a miraculous gift without the need of anything more. The fact is, I've always had a soft spot for Thomas because I tend to think of him as being the pragmatist, the engineer's disciple. Obviously Thomas didn't expect Jesus to come back as a living, breathing person - some kind of ethereal, Ghost-Busters-like spirit, maybe, but not the living Jesus. Since it was so unexpected, Thomas, like any good engineer, demanded proof - an examination of the phenomenon before he could believe it. Having proved to himself that his eyes weren't deceiving him, Thomas goes, in a flash, from total disbelief to total acceptance. And this wasn't the sort of wishy-washy flip-flop that politicians are so good at, either. This was the real thing. He was no longer a doubting Thomas. He became a convinced Thomas. He knew that Jesus was the risen Lord. The thing is that most of us are doubting Thomases to some degree. It's simple human nature to question what we don't understand and to seek proof that it's real. Unlike us, the Disciples, even doubting Thomas, had proof of the Resurrection in the form of the risen Jesus standing in their midst. But Jesus challenges us when he says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." How do we come to believe today, two thousand years later? I thought a lot about the readings - about faith, proof, and belief while I was filling out my taxes last week. And in the end, I decided to talk about bicycles today. I grew up on a forty acre "spare time farm" in what was in those days a semi-rural suburb of Boston where kids rode bicycles all over town. We had a work horse, a pony, a couple of cows, half a dozen pigs, a hundred chickens, and a big old barn. In the back of the barn was the usual collection of stuff: crates of chipped china, boxes of old books, worn out furniture, and broken farm utensils. The kind of stuff that Mainers call cultch, or what Bostonians (and some unscrupulous antique dealers) call heirlooms. Anyway, leaning against the wall amongst the family heirlooms was an old-fashioned bicycle - what used to be called an "ordinary" or a "bonebreaker." It had a six-foot-

high front wheel, a tiny rear wheel, and a little set of steps leading up to a seat on top. I used to be fascinated by this thing, wondering who dreamed up such an unlikely contraption, and more important, who was crazy enough to first try riding it. Luckily for me, the wheels were too rusted up to turn, or I might never have reached adulthood. In spite of that bone breaker, though, I knew for certain that I could learn to ride a regular bicycle. After all, my older sister had learned and if she could do it, I certainly could. They didn't have training wheels back then, so my long-suffering father would jog alongside the rear wheel and steady the bike while I pedaled. We had a long driveway, and after a while I'd feel his breath panting a little on the back of my head. Eventually, his breath would fade and I'd realize with terror that he'd let go and I would have to fend for myself. It didn't always end well at first. Bicycles have come a long way since my first balloon-tired Schwinn, not to mention that old bone-breaker. Today we have multi-speed bicycles, ergonomically shaped handlebars, and computer-designed frames made out of titanium, or carbon-fiber, or even, as I discovered recently, bamboo. There are mountain bicycles, cross-country bicycles, street bicycles, racing bicycles - something for every purpose. Yet, in spite of all that variety, they share one common unknown. The fact is that for all our sophistication, we still don't completely understand the fundamental mystery of how a bicycle works. Of course we know that bicycles do work because we see people riding them all the time. But how is it possible? After all, if we step back from our culture and look at a bicycle objectively all by itself, it's a pretty improbable object. It can't even stand up on its own. Just imagine some intrepid anthropologist showing a bicycle to an Inuit settlement high in the arctic, or an isolated tribe deep in the Amazon jungle. Would they believe that such a thing could be ridden? How many doubting Thomases would demand proof before they tried it? The embarrassing thing is that we don't have any proof, other than by demonstration. For decades it was thought that a bicycle's wheels acted like gyroscopes, and the angle of the front wheel fork helped to steady things. Then a couple of years ago, a group of Danish engineers came along, modern day doubting Thomases, who cleverly designed some sort of counterrotating wheels that had no gyroscopic effect, and they angled the front wheel forks to minimize stability. Guess what? Their invention worked just fine. So it was back to the drawing board for bicycle theory. Present thinking, buttressed by the latest super-computer analysis and theories of human biomechanics, is that bicycles work by an incredibly complex dynamic interaction between the rider and the bicycle. Now this might sound like simple common sense to most of us, but then we're not all doubting Thomases. As a kid, I never worried much about dynamic interactions, gyroscopes, or forks. Except maybe dinner forks. Instead, I focused on what was really important, the riding itself: the feeling of freedom, the sense of excitement and exploration, the hum of the tires on the pavement, the wind blowing in my hair, the joy of cresting a long steep hill and seeing that delightful downslope before the next, distant rise. But above all, I treasured the chance to see new places and do new things. I think bicycles can teach

us a lot about faith, and not just because we believe in them without knowing - or caring - exactly how they work. Bicycles, like faith, are communal. We're inspired to ride one because our older sister, or our best friend does and we want to join in the adventure, to be part of a group exploring and doing new things together. Also, we need the support and encouragement of somebody else as we learn to ride. Bicycles, like faith, can leave us bruised and in need of support. Bicycles, like faith, empower us to go where we are called to go and do what we are called to do. Whether we are a seeker of mountaintops, a doer, a dreamer, or even a Doubting Thomas, each of us, like the Apostles in today's reading from Acts, brings something, some ministry, to share in our life of faith together. What we sometimes forget, though, is the fact that a bicycle needs us as much as we need it. Unused, a bicycle is nothing but an inanimate object, worthy perhaps of computer analysis, but not much more. We are commissioned through faith to do God's work in the world, whatever that work might be, whether it's saving the world, caring for a loved one, or simply saying a kind word to a stranger. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," Jesus said. So, how do we explain our faith in the mystery of the risen Jesus to a skeptical Inuit, or even to our own inner doubting Thomas? The pragmatic bicycle rider might point out that two-thousand years after the Resurrection, the Good News still flourishes. It works. We have demonstrated that it works. And that is our answer - that is our proof. Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.