

Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA
April 19, 2009

“No Doubt About It!”

The 2009 baseball season is barely started and already there are questions whether the World Champion Philadelphia Phillies will repeat as baseball's champions. There have been roster changes, player injuries, and we know the record of the Phillies, many people probably doubt the Phillies can win the World Series two years in a row. History shows, the Phillies often come up short on the winning side. Who is the only team in baseball to have over ten thousand game losses in its club history? None other than our beloved Phillies! I cannot predict the future, but if history is an indication, I doubt the 2009 Phillies will win the World Series this year. We will wait and see. Come October, we will know.

We are obsessed with the future. From sports teams to political opponents to personal situations to what happens in the church. We are always trying to predict the future. Within a month of President Obama's inauguration, the media was trying to predict who the presidential contenders will be in 2012. Governor Jindal of Louisiana, the youngest person elected governor, presented the Republican response to President Obama's address to Congress back in February. The commentators were already saying Jindal could be the Republican Party's next presidential nomination. In our personal lives there may be situations where you look ahead, months maybe years, for a particular result. A future filled with ambiguity, questions, and doubt. Doubt that the situation will be resolved in an acceptable manner for all concerned; doubt that all the parts of the puzzle will result in a complete picture, doubt that a good thing repeats itself.

The church is not immune to doubt. Unfortunately though, I believe many Christians feel doubt has no place in our belief system. It's like because of our faith, we shouldn't have doubt. Living on this side of the resurrection, generations from the first resurrection, hearing the story of what happened that first Easter, how can we have doubt? Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead, for us. So how can we have doubt that God is with us, that God does not fulfill God's promise? When we hear the resurrection story, I wonder how many of us really believe and feel comfortable sharing Jesus' resurrection experience or even a personal resurrection story? There have been times in my life I doubted God's presence. Why now or, where are you God have been a part of my faith journey. I have no doubt that doubt will continue to be a part of my faith formation. Our response to

doubt expresses our level of faith. Recognizing doubt gives us a sense of our own resurrection. A removal of the personal cross we bear.

I find Thomas' expression of doubt refreshing; an honest reflection of his feelings. Here is a person who lived with Jesus, was one of the disciples, walked and talked with Jesus daily, heard His teachings, was probably there when he died, and now on that first Easter evening he doubts that his Lord was present among his fellow disciples while he was out tending to other business. Hours after the women discovered Jesus' body missing from the tomb; Thomas doubts Jesus is alive. The other disciples probably ribbed Thomas a bit, didn't you hear what Jesus said about His returning. Don't you believe? Weren't you paying attention to what Jesus taught us? Where is your faith? Thomas is not only a doubter, but also a man of devotion and courage. He had the courage to say he doubted. He doubted that Jesus presented himself to the disciples. He doubted what the disciples experienced and told them so. He needed proof, to see what he thought he already knew. Thomas was not afraid to express how he really felt, doubtful, questioning, wondering and yet desiring to be understood by his friends.

Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples that first Easter evening. We do not know where he was; maybe he was getting coffee or preparing the weekly pot luck supper or maybe he had another commitment in town. Either way, when he heard the news from his friends, he didn't trust them. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." Prove it. How often do present day Christians say similar words? Unless I see it for myself.... Prove it.... Show me, then I will believe. Maybe other people's actions or words have challenged your devotion and courage to express your faith honestly. You work to prove that your faith is strong. Your will to serve is true. Your desire to be with God is genuine; but you hide behind the cover of truly expressing doubt.

I can't believe Thomas was the only doubter that first Easter evening. If the gathered disciple's faith was secure, why then did they lock themselves in the room? Why were they afraid of the Jews? Did they not trust what Jesus had taught them? Or were they like you and me, afraid to express our true feelings of doubt even when we want to believe; to question honestly where God is in a difficult situation without feeling guilty for being honest? How often when we are faced with doubt do we hide? Instead of trusting our faith, in the unseen God, do we seek to be proven, show me the goods? Thomas is no more a doubter of the original disciples or disciples living in the 21st century; you and me. Like Thomas,

we have to find out for ourselves. Do you have the courage to share your doubts? Are you devoted in your faith to be open and honest about your fears of faith?

This past week I finished reading, “Losing my Religion” an autobiography of *Los Angeles Times* religion editor William Lobdell. Mr. Lobdell lands his dream job; the religion editor of a major newspaper. It is his job to tell the stories of faith to the public. He is excited to do what he calls God’s work. After about six years at Saddle Back church in southern California, he drops from church attendance and decides to join the Catholic Church with his wife. He and his wife were not allowed to take communion since they were married outside the Catholic Church. The bishop assured them if they attended classes they could be reinstated in the Catholic Church. All seemed to be going along well. Then the bottom started to drop out of Mr. Lobdell’s faith. The pedophile sex scandal of the Roman Catholic Church became public. It was Mr. Lobdell’s responsibility to report the truth. A truth that he could not understand. How could the leaders of the church cover up the details of such a horrific situation? Where was God in all this? Would God really let this happen? It literally shook his faith the core. Maybe you have been confronted with a situation where you questioned God; where you doubted God could be present. You doubted God cared.

During Lent, about thirty-five of us gathered weekly to talk about another book, *The Shack*. Here too, we found examples of normal ordinary people, like you and I doubting God. Asking the questions we face in daily life. How could God allow such horrible things to happen to us. In our conversations, we rarely talked about the story; instead we shared our personal experiences. We took time to get to know each other and reflect on how we handled ourselves when we thought God was not with us. We had living proof that God does come to us in the tough situations. We shared real experiences. Like the story, “Footprints in the Sand” when you think you are alone, Jesus is there carrying you along. I imagine, you can relate to a similar experience. I ask then, where is your devotion to God to carry you through? Do you believe that through Jesus Christ all things are possible? Or are you like Thomas, you need to see the results before you believe? Where is your faith? You have to see it for yourself.

A week later, Thomas is again with his disciple buddies in a locked home; still afraid. Jesus appears and offers to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” We don’t know if Thomas followed through on these actions. I doubt he had too. He received a personal encounter that made Jesus’ death and resurrection real to him. In fact, Thomas’ response, “My Lord and my God!” is the high point of

John's gospel. When Thomas gets it, he *gets* it. No one else, none of the other disciples, offered such devotion or named Jesus as God. Thomas holds out for an experience of Jesus on his own terms until he finds his terms made foolish by the reality of seeing Jesus. Only then, does Thomas make his statement of faith.

Thomas has to make this personal connection with Jesus for himself. The other disciples can't experience Jesus for Thomas. Thomas had to see for himself. Not only did he see, but Jesus said touch me. See for yourself the wounds. Touch, real verification of the living One. It is faith, not doubt that holds out for your own experience of Jesus. It is ok to doubt your faith. As the body of Christ, we are here to care for each other, to be like Jesus for each other, to love one another through thick or thin. When our faith is built on the promise of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are free to doubt, question and grow. Faith built upon devotion to God, the One who promises to be with you all the time, who sent His own Son to die on the cross and the courage to share honestly and openly, then as the people of God we share God's love with each other. God who loves us as he loved His Own Son; despite our wavering faith calls us to pick up your cross and follow Him. Faith to be courageous; courageous to ask the doubting questions; courage to seek for ourselves; courage to "share the life, love, and joy of Jesus Christ with others."