

After his death, his followers were in despair, while the enemies of Jesus were relieved. We know the story, how his end came violently and tragically.

We know too how Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on that Sabbath day to care for his lifeless and broken body.

She finds that he is not there, and runs to tell the disciples that he has risen.

They dismiss her account as female hysteria.

They had all been in hiding. The authorities in Jerusalem are adamant that this hero worship of Jesus Christ must end. They cannot have these followers showing more allegiance to him than to Rome. Even in death, he is still threatening their power and authority.

This is why the disciples are cowering in fear behind locked doors.

That evening, Jesus walks through the locked doors, stands among them and says, “Peace be with you.” They cannot believe it, wondering if they are hallucinating, seeing a ghost.

Then he shows them the scars on his hands and feet, and they realize it is Jesus.

John tells us “The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”

That was a huge understatement.

They must have been overjoyed and immensely relieved.

Jesus then offered them his peace and the power of the Holy Spirit, a power that would be with them always and give them courage and strength.

What an Easter gift to heal their broken hearts and deliver them from fear.

Now Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared, and when the others told him what had happened, he said:

“Unless I see for myself and touch for myself, I will not believe.”

Eight days later the disciples were all together again, and once again Jesus came.

He stood among them and invited Thomas to place his hand on the wounds, offering proof of his resurrection.

Finally, Thomas was convinced, and he exclaimed: “My Lord and my God.”

Throughout church history Thomas has suffered from a bad reputation, honest doubt being viewed as the enemy of faith.

He had a hard time believing without seeing.

It would have been so much better for Thomas had just accepted what the disciples told him, without needing proof.

But he had to see for himself before he could believe.

My focus in this sermon for the second Sunday in Eastertide, in light of the experience of Thomas, is to examine the place of honest doubt in the life of faith. Now, the sort of doubt Thomas displayed is something we all possess. Haven't you heard someone tell you about the best restaurant or movie or TV show, and you think to yourself, "Yeah, well I will have to see for myself." Especially when someone tells me about a great Sushi restaurant, or a great Reality TV show, I think "Yeah, well I seriously doubt it." It is basic human nature to question, to doubt and we all do it.

In our Scripture lesson today Thomas is identified as "The Twin" and in a way we all twins to doubting Thomas.

We want to see for ourselves before we believe.

When Jesus healed the demon possessed child in Mark's Gospel, the overjoyed father cried out, "Now I believe, please help my unbelief." He believed Jesus healed his child, but he knew that there was still so much that he doubted. He knew he needed help believing.

Many years ago I read a book by famous British pastor and theologian Leslie Weatherhead called The Christian Agnostic.

The title bothered me, because Weatherhead was a great man of faith who helped steer England through some of the darkest days of World War II.

But I was very impressed by this thoughtful book.

In the preface Weatherhead states:

"I am writing for the Christian agnostic, by which I mean the person who is immensely attracted by Christ and who seeks to show his spirit, to meet the challenges, hardships and sorrows of life in the light of that spirit, but who, though is sure of many Christian truths, feels that he cannot honestly and conscientiously "sign on the dotted line" that he believes certain theological ideas about which some branches of the church dogmatize; churches from which he feels excluded because he cannot believe or understand. His intellectual integrity makes him say about many things: "It may be so. I do not know."

Weatherhead's idea is for modern disciples to follow Jesus of Nazareth and learn from him, just as the first disciples did.

There is so much about following Jesus that we will never understand--the Virgin birth, the miracles, the transfiguration, the resurrection--but even those who doubt have a place at the table, and by sincerely seeking to love, serve and follow Jesus, faith grows.

Weatherhead is confident that a sincere spiritual seeker will, over time, develop the trust and beliefs they need to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Which is remarkably similar to the words of John Wesley to the early Methodist preachers: “Preach faith until you have it.”

He knew that they would have times when their faith was weak and sorely tested.

But his advice was to speak and act in faith and wait for it to grow.

You know when you are scared, and you pretend to be brave then your bravery grows? Well, when you genuinely seek God with an open heart, faith will grow. Remember, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains.

A life with God is not constantly blissful, anyway.

It is not always filled with the joy of Easter.

It can be demanding, discouraging, and difficult.

But the point is to keep trying, to stay faithful even when we do not feel like it.

To stay engaged with God even when we would rather walk away.

It is interesting to me that some of the people most used by God throughout history have regularly questioned and doubted God.

Abraham was incredulous and Sarah highly skeptical when God called them to a new beginning and promised them a son in their old age.

Jonah’s faith was so filled with doubt that he tried to run away from God.

Jesus’ disciples were constantly questioning and doubting.

Even Jesus wondered why God had abandoned him in his final hours.

Martin Luther appreciated the power of doubt by writing:

“Nobody in this life is nearer to God than those who doubt and question him, and he has no more pleasing, no more dear children than these.”

Now that is a shocking statement.

It suggests that the opposite of belief is not disbelief, but indifference.

The passionate unbeliever who doubts and questions God is at least taking God seriously. Such a person is engaging God and wrestling with God, like so many people from Jacob to Job, Moses to Paul, and even Jesus.

Someone who struggles with God still believes, still wants a relationship.

Honest doubt which passionately seeks the truth can be a holy thing.

Carl Michalson in Crisis of Doubt, wrote: “Conscientious people worry more than needful over their doubts. Often doubt is inoffensive, even indispensable. Doubt either worries weak ideas into exhaustion or exercises them into greater strength. Were it not for doubt’s tireless cross-examination, we would find the inertia of our

attitudes carrying us beyond the time of their usefulness. The doubting side of our mind knows we ought not to surrender to inadequate ideas and attitudes.”

I recently had a long conversation with someone who simply could not accept the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is a very good person, who lives out his beliefs in many ways, but he found the physical resurrection hard to accept because it cannot be proven.

I answered by saying that he was absolutely right, there is no scientific proof to which we can refer, and ultimately the empty tomb cannot be logically explained.

The church has debated for centuries the precise nature of the resurrection body and the physical body of Jesus, and there is no more clarity today than back then.

But in offering the gift of the resurrection, God is not asking us to abandon our intellectual integrity, only to trust, to believe without seeing.

And yet, like Thomas if necessary, we also have a chance to see before believing.

Because there is evidence of resurrection all around us.

Everywhere results have come from the fact that through the centuries women and men have been convinced that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

That conviction has changed the world.

First we have the testimony of Mary Magdalene and the other disciples.

When they encountered the risen Christ, doubt turned into conviction.

Defeated, frightened and despairing friends of Jesus became people of courage and passion who spread the message of Jesus far and wide.

Their efforts created a spiritual force that helped to topple the Roman Empire.

And in all the centuries since, so much has been done in the name of the risen Christ: churches and hospitals and orphanages and universities and shelters for the poor and homeless and forgotten have been established all over this world.

Hundreds of thousands of people have risked their lives to tell his story in every corner of the earth.

For me, seeing results like these is believing.

Although I cannot prove it, I do believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and through the Holy Spirit continues to bless and guide our lives.

I have experienced the power of the resurrection in my own life many times, as I have shared with all of you on so many occasions that you are probably sick of it.

The words to the Chris Isaak song that we heard earlier sum it up:

“I believe the angels listen God hears us pray

I believe that some day, we will find our way.”

And the Hymn we will sing shortly also describes it:

“You ask me know I know he lives? He lives within my heart.”

Believing is seeing.

Now, this past week was filled with significant and symbolic occasions.

Monday April 20 was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Columbine shooting,  
as I am sure you all know.

If ever there was an event to make you doubt the goodness of God, that was it, and  
it is still a fresh wound for so many people in our community.

Tuesday, April 21 was Holocaust Remembrance Day, a day to remember the  
slaughter of 6 million Jews and millions of others including Gypsies, the disabled,  
people who were gay, and anyone slightly different from the Aryan ideal of human  
perfection.

Wednesday, April 22 was Earth Day—a day to consider just how much we have  
abused and disregarded our Mother Earth, and to try to reverse the damage we  
have done before it is too late.

All of those commemorations could cause you to question God and God’s  
involvement in human affairs.

If God is good and actively involved in our world, why do such tragedies happen,  
and why is our planet headed straight for destruction?

Most of you know of Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, whose parents and  
sister were murdered at Buchenwald.

Wiesel was the one who coined the term Holocaust to describe the Jewish  
experience of unspeakable suffering in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

He has devoted his life to keeping the memory of those who died alive.

And he has wrestled with God, as you might imagine.

If anyone has a right to doubt the existence of God, it is Elie Wiesel.

But when he was interviewed after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, a reporter  
asked him about his faith. He said:

“I still do not understand why God allowed the Holocaust to occur. I have not  
resolved the question. But I have never lost faith in God....nor can I understand  
the lack of faith of so many, just when we need God most.

I would say that sometimes I have been closer to God because of all that I have  
been through.”

He then told a story that he heard in the concentration camp when he was young:

“Three rabbis put God on trial for being absent from humanity. They find God  
guilty as charged. When the trial is over, one rabbi looks at his watch and says,  
‘We must hurry it is time for evening prayers.’”

They have just condemned God for abandoning them,  
then bow their heads to pray to a God they do not fully understand.

That is what we, as people of faith, are expected to do.  
To show up, to trust, to believe, even in the face of our questions, our doubts, and  
so much in this life that we do not understand.

For our struggles and doubts do not change God's love for us. God is faithful  
even when we are not. God is the best even when we are the worst.  
And if we have a little bit of faith, God will help it to grow, and our lives will be  
increasingly blessed.

Let us pray...

Loving God:

Help us to believe, even when we cannot see. But for those times when we cannot  
believe without seeing, be patient with us. We love you, dear God. We believe in  
you. But for those times when we lack belief, help us. For those times we lack  
faith and love, forgive us.

Give us eyes to see resurrection all around us in our family and friends,  
in nature and music and the simple pleasures of each day.

Help us to know that Christ is Risen because he has changed our lives,  
and dwells within our hearts.

Amen.