

DOUBTS AND DOORS

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on April 27, 2003 (the second Sunday of Easter)

Scripture: John 20:19-31

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." *If that's true my parents were truly blessed.* I'm relatively sure they never questioned whether Jesus rose from the dead. They believed in his resurrection with as much certainty as they believed George Washington was our first president. They lived when there weren't really many options about what one believed. Parents, church, school and community – all reinforced Christian beliefs. Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus were people they read about in books but had never met. They believed without seeing, without evidence, without proof. They were utterly convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. *They were blessed* because they escaped the torment of uncertainty.

Doubt does contain torment. At some time in our lives, most of us experience the torment of uncertainty and doubt. For example, *teenagers* ask, "Does my girl friend or boy friend really like me?" The uncertainty can torment teenagers. *College students* leave a final exam tormented with doubts. "I didn't feel confident about my grasp of the material." *Husbands and wives* are sometimes tormented with doubts about fidelity. "Does my spouse love me? Is my spouse having an affair?" Questions like that torture us. But when Christians doubt the resurrection of Jesus – the torture is unimaginable. J.B. Phillips, in one of his books, tells about a minister who's doubts went over the edge to unbelief. He became so tormented that he took his own life. He left a note that said, "My entire life has been wasted." John Updike, in a recent novel, In the Beauty of the Lilies tells the story of a Presbyterian minister who is tormented by loss of his faith. He leaves the ministry and wanders aimlessly through the rest of his life. Religious doubt can torment us.

Our Gospel lesson this morning tells Thomas, like many of us, didn't find faith in the Risen Christ easy to come by. Unlike my parents and perhaps some of you, Thomas needed visible and palpable evidence of the resurrection. "Unless I see with my eyes, and thrust my fist into his side, I'm not going to believe." Thomas was what William James called a "tough minded" person in contrast to a "tender minded" person. "Tough minded" people, James said, go by the facts, are pessimistic, less likely to be religious, fatalistic, and skeptical. *was tormented by doubt*

That certainly sounds like Thomas. I'm glad John tells us about Thomas because many good Christians today have a similar personality. They say, "I believe, help my unbelief." They come to church and worship even when they question whether what the church preaches is true. Sometimes, like Thomas, they stay away from church for a while because they become so discouraged and tormented by their doubts.

So - how can we be sure Christ really rose from the dead? What kind of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus could possibly exist today? People can't even agree on what happened the day President Kennedy was shot. Was there a conspiracy? Were the Cubans involved or organized crime? Did Lee Harvey Oswald act alone? Was there a single bullet that hit both President Kennedy and Governor Connolly? Was there a gunman on the grassy knoll? Perhaps we'll never really know. If we can't be sure about what happened 40 years ago, how could we be sure about a far more incredible event that happened two thousand years ago?

And yet, as incredible as that event is, our faith in the resurrection of Jesus is not without evidence. There are a number of good books that set forth the evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Some of the books are ancient, written in the days when the Roman Empire was persecuting the Church. Some are scholarly like James Dunn's, The Evidence for Christ. And some of them a layperson will find very readable, like Lee Strobel's, The Case for Christ. Frank Morrison wrote the modern Christian classic, Who Moved the Stone? In the first chapter he says that he set out to write a book to prove that Jesus never rose again but the facts compelled him to reverse his convictions, and he wrote his book to show evidence that Jesus did rise from the dead. I commend these books to anyone who would like to know what historical evidence there is for the resurrection of Jesus. These books show that the resurrection is not without evidence. The evidence may not convince a skeptic who is determined not to believe, but the evidence may strengthen the faith of believers – or be the final nudge it takes for somebody on the brink of faith.

Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus is not commending blind faith. It's one thing to believe without seeing, it's another thing to believe without any critical considerations. Dr. A. B. Bruce writes, "Jesus doesn't bestow a benediction on credulity. Faith is a belief held in the presence of doubt rather than a belief that removes all doubt."¹

Did you hear what he said? "Faith is a belief held in the presence of doubt rather than a belief that removes all doubt." We believe in many things without seeing them because we're satisfied with something less than absolute demonstration. For example, marriage. We don't know when we get married how long the marriage will last. Couples get married with every intention of staying married. The longer you're married, the more assurance you have that your marriage will last. But unexpected events come up that can drive couples apart. Some people have gotten divorced after 50 years of marriage. But people get married, even when absolute certainty is impossible – because we're capable of being satisfied with something less than absolute demonstration. *And people can make a commitment to Christ with something less than*

absolute demonstration

I'm so happy most people in our congregation don't require absolute proof before trusting in the Risen Christ. Our congregation is blessed, truly blessed, with men and women who haven't resolved issues of faith and belief. That's not bad, it's good because it means we have faith, without seeing. G.A. Studdert-Kennedy writes in his poem entitled, "Faith".

How do I know that God is good? I don't
I gamble... I bet my life
Upon one side in life's great war.²

When we tithe, we're gambling that there really is a kingdom of God that's coming and that our tithes and offerings will help speed its arrival. When we pray, we're betting that the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ is listening. When we return good for evil – we're betting that Christ is risen and following him. When we stand up for what's right when everybody around us is simply going along with the crowd – we're betting that Christ really did rise from the dead and we're following his way. When we give up a week's vacation to work on a mission project, we're gambling on the Risen Christ. When you offer yourselves as mentors for the Oxford Education Foundation or volunteer at the Neighborhood Service Center or pledge to the Cystic Fibrosis walk – you're gambling on the Risen Christ.

Listen again to Studdert-Kennedy,

How can you prove a victory before
It's won? How can you prove a man who leads,
To be a leader worth the following,
Unless you follow to the death – and out
Beyond mere death...

We can't prove that Christ is a leader worth following unless we start to follow where his feet have trod, unless we take some risky steps of following him.

One of the most appealing things about our church is that we welcome Doubting Thomases. We believe that questioning can lead to faith. Richard Baxter, a Puritan minister, said, "*nothing is so firmly believed as that which has once been doubted.*"¹ I encourage you to take full advantage of all the educational and missional opportunities our church offers because it is through study, worship, prayer and service that we grow in our faith. We welcome doubters, who, like Thomas are willing to inquire. Here you'll find a safety zone where your doubts can be raised without being made to feel like a second-class Christian.

We don't know for sure what happened to Thomas but there's a beautiful legend in an ancient book entitled, The Acts of Thomas, which says that Thomas was a carpenter by trade and went as a missionary to India. In India he became a servant to ^{the} King of the Indians. The king commanded Thomas to build a palace. He gave Thomas huge amounts of money, materials and workmen. Thomas, however, gave all the money and material to the poor to help them have a better life. Whenever the king asked Thomas about the palace, Thomas would answer, "It's coming along." Eventually the king grew suspicious because he saw no sign of a palace. He demanded to see the palace but Thomas said, "You can't see it yet. But when you depart this life you will see it." The king grew angry and threatened the life of Thomas. But in the end the king was won for Christ, and so Thomas brought Christianity to India. Blessed was that king, who though he couldn't see the heavenly palace, he nevertheless believed.³

¹ A Treasury of Great Sermons on the Resurrection, compiled by Wilbur M. Smith, "The Doubt of Thomas" by A.B. Bruce, pp.145-153.

² G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, The Unutterable Beauty, pp. 5-7.

³ William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Volume 2, pp. 322-323.

DOUBTS AND DOORS

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on April 27, 2003 (the second Sunday of Easter)

Scripture: John 20:19-31

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

1. My parents were truly blessed. *They were blessed* because they escaped the torment of uncertainty.
2. Doubt does contain torment... the torment of uncertainty and doubt.
 - Teenagers
 - College students
 - Husbands and wives
 - Doubt about safety, health, retirement
 - Questions like that torture us.
3. But when Christians doubt the resurrection of Jesus – the torture is unimaginable.
 - J.B. Phillips
 - John Updike, in a recent novel, In the Beauty of the Lilies
 - Religious doubt can torment us.
4. Our Gospel lesson this morning tells us Thomas ^{wasn't} didn't find faith in the Risen Christ easy to come by. ^{He was tortured -} Thomas needed visible and palpable evidence "Unless I see with my eyes, and thrust my fist into his side, I'm not going to believe."
 - Thomas was what William James called a "tough minded" person
 - I'm glad John tells us about Thomas – like us
 - Sometimes, like Thomas, they stay away from church for a while because they become so discouraged and tormented by their doubts.
5. So - how can we be sure Christ really rose from the dead? – The day President Kennedy was shot.
 - what cause say to those tortured*
 - what kind of evidence could exist*
6. Our faith in the resurrection of Jesus is not without evidence.
 - James Dunn's, The Evidence for Christ.
 - Lee Strobel's, The Case for Christ.
 - Frank Morrison, Who Moved the Stone?
7. Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."
 - We are not to ignore the evidence or take a blind leap*
 - Jesus is not commending blind faith. *when he says*
 - Dr. A. B. Bruce writes, "Jesus doesn't bestow a benediction on credulity. Faith is a belief held in the presence of doubt rather than a belief that removes all doubt."¹
8. Did you hear what he said? "Faith is a belief held in the presence of doubt rather than a belief that removes all doubt."
 - Some things can't be proved except by faith -- e.g. scientific theories
 - We're satisfied with something less than absolute demonstration.
 - Marriage also
 - Also faith in Christ and his resurrection. *People can make a covenant in less than absolute demonstration*
9. I'm so happy most people in our congregation don't require absolute proof
 - Our congregation is blessed^{ly} resolved issues of faith and belief.
 - That's not bad, it's good because it means we have faith, without seeing.
 - G.A. Studdert-Kennedy writes in his poem entitled, "Faith".
 - How do I know that God is good? I don't*
 - I gamble... I bet my life*
 - Upon one side in life's great war.*²
10. Faith ~~is~~ is somewhat of a gamble. When you doubt -
 - When we tithe... Pray... Return good for evil... When we stand up for what's right... give up a week's vacation
 - mentors for the Oxford Education Foundation... Neighborhood Service Center... Cystic Fibrosis walk -- you're gambling on the Risen Christ.
 - Listen again to Studdert-Kennedy,
 - How can you prove a victory before*

*It's won? How can you prove a man who leads,
To be a leader worth the following,
Unless you follow to the death – and out
Beyond mere death...*

We can't prove that Christ is a leader worth following unless we start to follow where his feet have trod, unless we take some risky steps of following him.

11. One of the most appealing things about our church is that we welcome Doubting Thomases.

Questioning can lead to faith. Richard Baxter, a Puritan minister, said, "*nothing is so firmly believed as that which has once been doubted.*"

Take full advantage of all the educational and missional opportunities our church offers
We welcome doubters, who, like Thomas are willing to inquire.
You'll find a safety zone

12. We don't know for sure what happened to Thomas but there's a beautiful legend

¹ A Treasury of Great Sermons on the Resurrection, compiled by Wilbur M. Smith, "The Doubt of Thomas" by A.B. Bruce, pp.145-153.

² G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, The Unutterable Beauty, pp. 5-7.