

“Bring Your Doubts to Church”

Dr. Rodney W. Kennedy

(Acts 4:32-35, 1 John 1:1-4, John 20:19-31)

2nd Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2009

On the Sunday after Easter, John tells us that “Jesus came and stood among the disciples.” But all is not well in the land of Easter. An apostle is missing without a trace. **Thomas was not with them when Jesus came.** I am reminded that a recent survey suggests that on Sunday morning at least 50% of a congregation seriously considers being somewhere else. When Thomas sees his friends, he is unmoved by their testimony: “We have seen the Lord.”

Thomas says, “**I will not believe.**” It can be so easy to get sideways with Jesus and his ways. So no surprise when Thomas throws a rock at the stained glass window of church truth. But it is the cry of a doubting believer, not the voice of an intellectual snob proud of his arrogant unbelief. Not the articulate dismissal of God by the new atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. Not the argument of a religion professor who calls himself “the happy agnostic.” Thomas suffers from what Charles Taylor calls, “an exile, an [inability] to ever reach a place of well-being; melancholy” (*The Secular Age*).

Doubting believers like Thomas dare say what many others keep secret. We fear the answers so we don’t raise the questions. Or we fear the questions and we give superficial, pat answers. Stanley Hauerwas says, “Christians are often tempted to say more than we know. We are so tempted because we fear we do not believe what we say we believe. So we try to assure ourselves that we believe what we say we believe by convincing those who do not believe what we believe that they really believe what we believe once what we believe is properly explained.” But people like Thomas don’t need pious chatter.

So while there’s doubt plastered all over John 20, the reading concludes with one of the strangest statements in the New Testament: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.” People have all these doubts, and John knows a lot more about Jesus that he’s not telling. Would it not help to give folks more signs, more evidence, and more proof? No rest of the story?

This is especially hard to take for Googlers, U-Tubers, Twitterers, and Facebookers in the information age. Clay Shirky’s book, *Here Comes Everybody*, recommended to me by Brad Kallenberg, is a must read for anyone wanting to understand how the internet has changed public discourse. We are such avid consumers of information and the idea that some information might be kept secret makes no sense in our world. So when John keeps from us “many other signs” done by Jesus in the presence of his disciples, we aren’t happy. It’s not gossip he’s hoarding, it’s the gospel about the most important person to ever live.

Well, John does tell us one more thing: The Gospel has been written to bring us to trust in Jesus – to a place of fullness and flourishing, to a life that is fully satisfying, in which we can rejoice. Charles Taylor says that our lived experience is one of fullness, exile, or a middle condition. Many of us live in this middle condition – a place which keeps at bay the depression but doesn’t produce fullness or satisfaction. In the middle position we find it hard to receive the gift of trust that would help us flourish. And in our lived experience we find both believers and unbelievers in this middle, unsatisfying, not quite joyful place of dis-ease.

Thomas has had the trust knocked out of him. Experts say that we are having a **crisis of trust**. But trust is hard and risky for life has no guarantees. British philosopher Onora O'Neill has argued that our society is actually suffering from a crisis of suspicion. In the world of power politics and vested interests, there are people who make it their business to undermine trust. Not only are we more cynical, with high levels of suspicion, but "we don't feel the great institutions of our society are working for us." We are paranoid of hidden agendas and hidden advantages and we suspect that something sinister and hostile is going on and it is humiliating and paralyzing. The sociologist Niklas Luhman says, "A complete absence of trust would prevent [one] from even getting up in the morning."

It is precisely the absence of trust that fuels the doubt of Thomas. Thomas cries, "Unless I see Jesus in flesh and blood I will not believe." Thomas gets caught practicing bad religion. "Bad religion is about not trusting God, trying to avoid God or even outwitting him." How odd that the Christian way is so filled with obnoxious, "my way or the highway" attitudes. UNLESS is a nasty word. Humans who make such demands of God seem oblivious to the reality that God doesn't actually need us. Perhaps we've attended too many self-esteem seminars if we don't realize that God would have been the same God if we had never been created. Rowan Williams reminds us, "We must get to grips with the idea that we don't 'contribute' anything to God. God is eternally happy being God." Or maybe the word "unless" is a verbal bully and hiding behind threats. This is probably closer to the heart of what plagues Thomas.

Well what happens? The next Sunday, the doubt of Thomas meets the resurrected Jesus. Thomas brings his doubts to church and displays them in public. Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus reaches down to Thomas and touches his emotional pain: the anguished doubt. Notice that Jesus has no lecture, recrimination, or condemnation. Jesus offers to enrich dimensions of our humanity that are not properly looked after by any of the things that are normally supposed to make us feel all right. "Bring your doubts to church."

So let's ask: Why should we trust God? We can trust God because God keep God's Word. One of the ways we learn to trust people is whether or not they keep their promises. Earlier in John, Jesus promised to give his peace to his disciples; in John 20: "Peace be with you." Earlier he promised to send them the Holy Spirit; in John 20: He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Now, in the presence of the raised-from-the-dead Jesus, Thomas sees and believes. "My Lord and my God!" The confession of Thomas is the supreme confession of faith of the Fourth Gospel. And it is creedal material. Like the Apostles' Creed – based on the Bible, a summary of our faith, a public confession of faith, and a Christian "pledge of allegiance." We have impoverished our liturgy with our refusal to use the creeds, and we have failed to be good ecumenical partners. "My Lord and my God" is a confession of faith corresponding to the promises Jesus made from the beginning, and it's all coming back to Thomas now – "I AM THE" light of the world," "bread of life," "resurrection and the life," and "way, the truth, and the life."

We can also trust God because God has no secret agenda. Rowan Williams, in *Tokens of Trust*, says that God's will in creation is directed entirely towards the benefit of ourselves and the rest of creation; it is in no way a selfish or capricious purpose. What is the Lord's meaning? Julian of Norwich, "Love was his meaning." At the heart of all the desperate suffering in the world there is an indestructible energy making for love.

Let's give our doubts an Easter cleansing! We can trust Jesus, what he says, what he promises, because he keeps his word. We can trust God because there's no hidden agenda, no malicious intent, only generous love, and desire for our flourishing. And with Easter eyes and hearts we can exclaim, "Christ is risen!" **"Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!"**

Sources

David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*.

Leonard Griffith, *Gospel Characters: The Personalities Around Jesus*.

Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*. Recommended reading.

David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*

Francis J. Maloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John. Sacra Pagina*, vol. 4.

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. I am looking for a small number of people willing to read and discuss this powerful book with me.

Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Order this book ASAP and read it with joy. A must read. The sermons during Eastertide will use material from this book on a regular basis.