

“Doubt” by Ken Burton

April 3, 2016



Second Sunday of Easter

Scripture

Acts 5: 27-32

Psalm 118

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Good morning! The Revised Common Lectionary readings for today are, for the most part, strong, unambiguous affirmations of faith, which seems appropriate for the Sunday following the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

Because it is the Easter Season, we have a reading from Acts in lieu of one from the Hebrew Scriptures. This Sunday's passage is the courageous response of the apostles to the very true accusation from the Temple authorities that they were out there teaching in Jesus' name despite being firmly told by the authorities not to do so. But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority," knowing full well that this kind of arrogant, in-your-face response raised the possibility that they would soon meet the same fate as Jesus. That this in fact did not happen until many

years later and in a different setting does not lessen the risk of faith that the Apostles took that day in Jerusalem.

The passage from Revelation includes the powerful hymn “to Jesus Christ...who loved us and frees us from our sins...and made us to be a kingdom...to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”

And the 118th Psalm, which we did not read, contains some of the most powerful and memorable verses of the Psalter:

The Holy One is my strength and my might and has become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the day that the Holy One has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Give thanks to the Holy One, for God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Now we turn to the Gospel reading from John 20 which, while ending on an affirmative note, includes the story of the apostle who has come to be known as doubting Thomas.

The disciples, or most of them, were gathered in secret behind locked doors for fear of the Temple authorities. Suddenly Jesus was among them. He greeted them as he had so many times before, “Peace be with you.” Then, as if to ease any doubts they might have that it really was Jesus, he showed them the crucifixion wounds in his hands and his side.

This is the writer of the Fourth Gospel’s version of the empowerment of the disciples through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are more familiar with this event through the story of Pentecost, in Acts. In John’s version, Jesus simply breathed on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” I could say more here about the relation of breath and spirit, but that is another sermon, maybe one for Interplay.

Thomas was the one of the remaining eleven who was not present. When the others told him of their encounter with Jesus, Thomas refused to believe them. He insisted on seeing Jesus himself before he would believe the story. Not only did he want to see Jesus, he wanted to touch the wounds in his hands

and side. Because of his need for **an immediate experience of the Risen Christ**, as opposed to hearing a story about him, Thomas has come down through the centuries with the label “doubting” attached to his name.

So this passage from John is called the story of “Doubting Thomas.” This name is, I believe, unfair, because it points to only part of Thomas’ story. He does, indeed, doubt, but that doubt is accompanied by, perhaps embedded in, a profound faith. Thomas desperately wants to believe what he has heard about Jesus’ ongoing presence in the world, but he cannot do so until he has seen it for himself. His doubt is grounded in this faith.

Now please bear with me as I change the focus from Jerusalem in the fourth decade of the first century of the Common Era to Canton, NY, in the middle of the ninth decade of the twentieth century. Canton is in far upstate New York, only a few miles from the Canadian border. It is the location of St. Lawrence University, the campus of which was that year the site of the Gathering of Friends General Conference. This annual event brings together for a week in the summer on a college campus some twelve to fifteen hundred Quakers for lectures, small group work, fellowship, and fun. This particular July was exceptionally warm for the North Country with afternoon temperatures well into the 90’s. My personal finances were exceptionally tight at the time, so I was sleeping outdoors in a tent. After lunch one day, I really wanted a nap, so I lay down in my tent, which was extremely warm, actually, very hot. I’m sure the temperature was at least 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

What happened next may be casually dismissed as a heat induced hallucination, and it may, indeed, have been brought on by the extreme temperature, but that is no reason to dismiss it, casually or otherwise. The experience was very real for me at the time and remains so today, more than thirty years later. Some of you have heard this story before, and I ask you to bear with me as I cast it in the context of relating doubt and faith.

As I lay half-asleep in my tent, I had a strong sense that I was very much loved, not loved by anyone in particular, but simply loved. As I was enjoying that sensation, which some regard as a sign of an authentic spiritual experience, I was aware of a Presence in the tent with me. I did not actually see anyone or anything, but I was nevertheless totally sure that I was not alone. Next came a few words, not spoken aloud but clearly articulated in my

mind. Their content was some advice about a relationship problem which I was having at the time. Then it was over: no more words, no more Presence, just lots of heat and humidity.

Upon becoming a Quaker about ten years before this event, I had laid down the traditional Christian belief system with which I had been raised. One of the attractions of the Religious Society of Friends, at least as it exists in the eastern part of the US, is that it has a very limited and flexible belief system. Some would say that it has no belief system. I think that is unfair, but however that may be, one can be a modern Quaker without articulating or believing anything like what we find in our Seekers commitment statements. There are actually people who claim to be agnostic or even atheist Quakers, although to me those are oxymorons. In any case, as a refugee from traditional Christianity, the Quaker world was very right for me at the time. I wasn't sure what I believed or even if that mattered.

My experience in the hot tent in Canton changed all of that. As soon as I was aware of the Presence, even before the words came to mind, I knew that it was the Risen Christ and that whatever happened next would shape the future of my life. I worried for an instant that I would be told to go and preach in some distant, inhospitable place, but the words that did come to me put an end to such fantasies. When it was over, I knew that I was a believing Christian and that, as I was given the grace to do so, I would be a follower of Jesus.

Unlike Thomas, I never said that I cannot believe unless certain conditions are met, but the truth is that I did *not* truly believe until, like Thomas, I had an immediate experience of Christ's presence. What I am suggesting is that doubt, far from being the opposite of or the enemy of faith, is actually a key component of the experience of faith, that faith is less real, less solid, less believable, less faithful, if you will, when it is not accompanied by or somehow connected to, serious questioning and doubt. The story of Doubting Thomas would be better called that of "Faithful Thomas."

Some undisclosed source has opined that "Belief is rigid and sterile without doubt, but without belief, doubt is dark and devastating." [Repeat] While this formulation may be too neat and tidy, it is another way of stating my central point: healthy belief and doubt are not antithetical but rather closely connected, perhaps to the point of being necessary for one another.

It is because I have doubted, and occasionally do doubt, that I can and do believe.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Amen.