

Sermon for 11 April 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday after Easter

Scriptures: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-22; John 20:19-31

“Again and again...”

We are now in the period of the church year called “The Great Fifty Days,” meaning the seven weeks between Easter and Pentecost.

We try to keep a steady story-line ... but don't hold us too literally to consecutive events. The story is too wide-spread, and the documents come from too many hands and too varied a time-line and place-setting, and told by too many voices.

This Sunday we spotlight the disciple Thomas, one of the twelve. He was absent the first time Jesus appeared in the midst of the other disciples where they were hiding for fear of the Roman soldiers guarding Jerusalem. So we focus on him, and call him “Doubting Thomas,” because he insisted he would not believe Jesus had come and stood among them “unless I see...”

You know the story, and we've just told it again ...

...which is the theme of what I want to ask you to think and pray about this week. How many times do you believe, and then doubt, and then believe again?

This is crucial if we expect, and want, to grow in faith.

Look again at the details. The ten disciples gathered behind closed doors believed because they saw and heard Jesus. The beloved disciple believed at the tomb without entering. Mary Magdalene believed because of a voice: “Mary.”

Some people struggle with doubt again and again. We are constructed differently. Different things happen to us along the way. Twenty years after being baptized, some people may go through a “dark night of the soul” that is part of faith's journey for many.

Thomas, in other parts of scripture, is described as brave and ready to step out and lead in taking risks for the faith. Tradition has him establishing a mission to India. There is a Gospel of Thomas that didn't get chosen for the New Testament, but dates from the second century A.D. and is well-regarded in biblical scholarship.

What I would like to encourage is permission to be considerate of ourselves in the thoughts and praying we carry on, both following the hymns and prayers we share, and in our most personal conversations with God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Particularly in this era when so many people are standing back from organized religion, and when so much divergence exists even among faithful church-goers, it is important to respect the mystery of trust. For instance, I am not going to back down from saying war is against the faith of Christ, or that welcoming people at the border is first and *then* choosing how to handle the problems that produces... or any

number of strong differences among believers. I'm strongly against splitting the denomination, for example, over homosexuality. All these things get in the way of a smooth walk with Jesus ... they are like every other part of human experience: Part fact, and part discussion, growth, change of heart ...

Again and again, the good news that holds us together, and that divides us from what we used to think, and tugs us towards what we eventually decide is God's truth for us ... again and again, this grace, this patience coming from above, from the "other side," from the silence we listen to seriously in our development as individuals and as members of a fellowship ... this is basic to maturing in love.

Let us sum up this Sunday's report of Easter, with the psalm's reminder of how good it is when we can agree deeply with those we relate to; with its report of all sharing responsibility for one another's needs, and of the forgiving spirit that abounded among them, even as they faced the need to exercise constraint and even discipline in their ranks; and most especially, when we experience Thomas' wrestling and wondering and are called, by the gentle and abiding word of Jesus, to accept ourselves and love our wondering even as it stresses us out and sometimes slows the meeting down awhile.

Let us pray:

Lord, remind us how the scripture insists today that those who never see visions, who wonder after being clear for a long period, and who are always just getting started at trusting and following you ... that even these, even such as we, are truly your sheep, your beloved sisters and brothers.

Amen.