

Easter II B April 19, 2009

Acts 4:32-35, 17-26; 1st John 1: 1-22; John 20:19-31

Christ Church, Needham, MA

Thomas Moore

May the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts empower us to grow in knowledge and love of you, Oh, Lord, our strength and redeemer. AMEN.

DOUBT... DOUBTING THOMAS... Me, a Thomas. Is there a message in your invitation to be the guest preacher on this, today's Gospel?

Message or not, my wife, the Reverend Helen Moore, a seminarian classmate of your rector, and I are honored to be with you here at Christ Church, and thankful for special time with Kathy and Skip. As today's Psalm reads, "Oh, how good and pleasant it is when sisters and brothers live together in unity." It is indeed good and pleasant to be here, Skip. Thank you.

A year ago, I became the first lay Executive Director of a 150 year old Episcopal foundation, one with an anachronistic name, The Society for the Increase of the Ministry, or S.I.M. An anachronistic name, yes, but a very relevant, significant ministry. Since 1857 S.I.M. has supported Episcopal seminarians—financially, pastorally, and by advocating for seminarians within the councils of the Church.

When initially contacted by a recruiter, my first thought was: "What an anachronistic name!" Followed by a second notion: "Scholarships for seminarians a worthy cause, certainly, but a seeming narrowly focused mission for a national organization." Then, a more profound reflection, "Could this be of God?" I had my doubts.

In our Spiritual Journey, Helen and I have discovered that if opportunities arise, “out-of-the-blue”, we best pay attention... despite our doubts. We best be cautious about leaning unto our own understanding. As for doubts, we best use them to push us to think—spiritually think...to explore and to question our limited vision.

Prayerful examination of the S.I.M. opportunity led to a deeper “seeing”—seeing that seminarians are far more than just theological students, checking off a major obligation on the path to ordination. Seminarians are the future leaders of our Church. Seminarians thus will be shaping our Church in the future. Seminarians are critical to the future of the Church we love. Realizing S.I.M.’s potential as a catalyst with significant impact on our Church’s future made accepting this responsibility...getting beyond doubt...arriving at an “ahah” moment... somewhat like, well (not to be overdramatic), putting my hand in Jesus’ side. It was then that the idea of a call became tangible, and I could see. Then that I could believe. Then that, beyond doubt, S.I.M.’s invitation to lead as Executive Director was God’s call.

Of course, moving beyond doubt is not a once and forever victory. It’s one thing to believe and another to follow and implement. Soon this Doubting Thomas was looking for a sign—further confirmation of this call—to come from my initial fund raising letter. It came in an “out-of-the-blue,” amazing blessing. The first donation of my S.I.M. tenure was from your rector, whose gift recognized the support S.I.M. provided Miranda Hassett, your seminarian assistant here a few years ago. I can’t tell you, Skip, how much opening your letter meant... to me and to the commencement of my ministry at S.I.M.

In today’s Gospel, the doubt-plagued disciples are hiding in the Upper Room. They are a timid little band, terrified because their dream had evaporated. “We had hoped,” said they, “that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.” Where there was once hope... now it’s “doors...doors locked for fear....” Once in the streets speaking publicly with Jesus to the countryside, now they spoke in whispers among

themselves. All Hell was breaking loose around them, and in them. Surely, emotionally battered; surely, plagued with questions; surely, beleaguered by doubts...until, until they saw the Lord for themselves, and silent fear was transformed into proclamation of the Good News. But Thomas was not there.

Why was Thomas missing from the Upper Room's first gathering? Was it fear...hopelessness...a feeling of betrayal...embarrassment that Thomas had cast all his trust on a dreamer? Or was Jesus' brutal death was so overwhelmingly real for Thomas that he couldn't imagine anything beyond Jesus' crucifixion. Whatever the reason for Thomas' absence, he would not again risk belief in the intangible.

Should we condemn Thomas...or should we bless him? Doubting Thomas speaks what we dare not. Thomas' candor grants us permission to be as openly human as he was. Thomas manifests what it is to shrink from life's disillusionments but ultimately move beyond doubt in search of truth. Thomas spoke the truth of his limited vision, out loud, neither claiming to understand the un-understandable, nor to believe the unbelievable. Belief in the disciple's reports was too risky a choice for Doubting Thomas; he demanded tangible confirmation. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas' doubt was certain, but then he did return. Ultimately, Thomas did not let doubt shut him down. Instead, doubt opened him to: not surrendering in his pursuit of truth; not quitting on God when it felt as if God had quit on him; to risk seeking the Risen Christ in new ways. Perhaps Doubting Thomas could be better understood as Searching Thomas.

Doubt is fundamental to human existence. It's not doubt that thwarts our faith; it's how we respond that either increases or prevents growth in faith. Doubt can be a positive change-agent. There is more potential for embodying faith in the one who

faces doubt than there is in the one who glibly repeats the unexamined creeds of others. “An unexamined life is not worth living,” said Socrates. Doubt can be dynamic or doubt can be debilitating. Dynamic doubt engages one to confront the questions of life. Debilitating doubt holds God at arm’s length, eventually leading to self-absorption and stagnation. Dynamic doubt is a spiritual friend; debilitating doubt, one of Satan’s favorite tools. Author, theologian Frederick Beuchner puts it well: “How could God reveal himself in a way that leaves no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

Today we have perspective unavailable to Thomas. Today we know that ultimate reconciliation took place on Calvary when the One martyred by the world forgave the world. Yet the Doubting Thomas in us still needs to know that Jesus is not a God who just stands above it all but stands with us all. Thomas teaches us not to let fear, disappointment, and uncertainties drive a wedge between God and us. Thomas shows us what it is to walk away for a moment but return for a lifetime.

God wants us, like Thomas, to move through times of doubt to moments of decision. Doubt in hand, Thomas chose to name his doubt and live into the questions arising from the seeming absence of Jesus. Getting beyond doubt and confronting life’s questions ultimately led this man called Thomas to one of the most profound confessions of faith in all the Gospels. When we feel the absence of Jesus in our lives, we’re tempted to doubt. May we, like Thomas, choose to confront our doubt, seek to find Jesus and reach that point of professing his presence: “My Lord and my God!” AMEN.