

Sermon
Easter 2--C
St. Andrew's, Methuen
April 24, 2022
William Bradbury

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 150
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Today our New Revised Standard Version does us a disservice by translating the statement of Jesus to Thomas as, "Do not doubt but believe."

The Greek word "pistos" is translated faith, so the word "apistos"—used here—would naturally mean "no faith", just as our word a-moral is someone who is not moral.

The KJV gets it right when Jesus says to Thoms, "**be not faithless, but believing.**"

The English Standard Version says, "**Do not disbelieve, but believe.**"

Jesus is not telling Thomas to stop his doubting, because Jesus knows doubt is a part of any faith.

When young C. S. Lewis was an atheist, he said he had doubts about his atheistic beliefs, and when he became a Christian, he had doubts about his Christian beliefs.

We have two choices: to have faith or not to have faith.

Whichever we choose, we will have doubts.

That's why it is a spiritual mistake to want a faith that is bulletproof, for what we gain in **certainty**, we lose in depth.

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Therefore, instead of "Doubting Thomas", I wish he were called "**Absent Thomas**". He doesn't receive the gift of faith, because he's absent from the community when Jesus appears.

If he were called "Absent Thomas" we might be more mindful when we are tempted to absent ourselves from church.

Jesus says, "When two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them". We experience **Jesus most often when we are engaged with each other—in worship, fellowship, and mission.**

You know the story of the 19th century pastor who is visiting a member who has stopped coming to church. They talk about many things on that

wintery day, but then the pastor takes pair of tongs and removes a red-hot coal from the grate and places it on the hearth away from the fire. Slowly the coal becomes black and cold. Then the pastor picks it up and places it back into the fire, where it catches fire again.

This image reminds me of a line from the liturgy of the eastern Orthodox Church:

“Come, Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your love.”

In the Upper Room on Easter evening the Risen Jesus breathes into the disciples the Divine Fire of the Spirit, giving them the power to forgive, which means they are free to love others as Jesus loves them, which is unconditionally.

Jesus loves, not because of anything that is inherently lovable in us, or worthy of being loved, **but simply because it is God’s nature to love.** Worthiness has nothing to do with it.

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As we all know, sometimes whole churches lose God’s Fire, because they are organized around different priorities.

For example, during my time as rector of Grace, New Bedford, I learned that 100 years ago the English mill owners went to the grand stone Episcopal Church on the hill, while the English mill workers went to the simple wood Episcopal Church at the bottom of the hill.

When we make central something other than the Fire of God's Love, then it's easy to justify keeping out those we judge too wounded to attend: at various times it's been divorced, homosexual, addicted, mentally ill folks, and of course people of color.

I am not saying these churches did not also have signs of God's Love, but just wonder what could have happened if we had trusted that Divine Fire enough to live as the first centuries of the church did when Paul could say, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor male and female" for all social barriers are burned up by Divine Love revealed in Christ, crucified and risen.

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IN our day, of course, progressive churches have sought to remedy this situation by being explicitly welcoming to all. **And this is a good thing.**

But it's not enough to add these different people, if the church itself is cold and dead.

The gospels are clear: the disciples must first receive the Divine Fire from Christ, before they are capable of sharing that Fire with others.

When we stop asking the Risen Christ to breathe God's Fire into our church and into our individual hearts, there will be no fire for others to catch.

One reason we stop asking for God's Fire is because we think we don't need it.

We're more than happy to offer a helping hand, but until we are happy to admit we are also wounded and need God's help, we won't come alive.

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Thomas says he won't believe Jesus has been raised from death unless he can see Jesus' wounds. **First, if he sees the wounds**, Thomas will know this is the same crucified man, not a ghost or spirit.

But secondly, I suspect, **Thomas understands that a Jesus without wounds would not be worth following.**

Shortly after the horror of World War One Edward Shillito wrote a poem called, "**Jesus of the Scars**". It begins, "If we have never sought, we

seek Thee now;...We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow, We must have thee, O Jesus of the Scars.”

He concludes with:

“But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak....”

Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple who died in 1944, comments on that poem by saying, **“Only a God in whose Perfect Being pain has its place can win and hold our worship.”** Readings in Saint John’s Gospel, page 366

If Jesus doesn’t run from his wounds, then maybe we can face our wounds and our need for the Fire of God’s Love.

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I’ve mentioned before Jesuit Priest Greg Boyle who worked 25 years with the gangs of L.A., creating Homeboy Industries that employs hundreds of reforming gangbangers. I once heard him tell the story of one of these men who Boyle got to address a room full of social workers.

The 27-year-old man told them of his abusive upbringing and how he would have to wear three t-shirts to school, so the blood from the wounds inflicted on him each morning by his mother wouldn’t bleed through. His buddies made fun of the three shirts. One day, however, many years later,

he learned to love his wounds. He would caress the scars while looking at them in the mirror.

“After all”, he said to the startled social workers, “How can I help the wounded, if I don’t love my own wounds.”

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Jesus says, “See my hands and my side. Be not faithless, but believing.”

Believe that out of these wounds God’s Fire comes for the healing of the wounded—including us.