2 Easter

April 27, 2014

In the name of the God of all Creation,

The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,

And the power of God known in the Spirit.

Amen.

*“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

Is there room for skeptics … those with questions, perhaps even doubts … is there room for skeptics in the Church today? Today’s gospel reading is the same one we hear every year on the Sunday after Easter: the story of Doubting Thomas. Portrayed by the author of John’s gospel as a skeptic it is given a negative, or pejorative, slant. Personally, I think Thomas gets a bad rap. Although he may have been the first to question the veracity of the claim of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he was certainly not the last.

When Thomas hears the other disciples tell him that they have been with Jesus who had died on the cross days earlier he responds in disbelief as any honest skeptic might. And it seems that Thomas was not the only skeptic amongst the disciples. Remember last week on Easter Sunday. that the risen Jesus told Mary Magdalene and the other Mary that he would meet the disciples in Galilee? Well, when the disciples gather in Galilee … in the very last verses of Matthew’s gospel … Jesus appears to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee. “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.”

I, for one, understand Thomas’ skepticism. This story of encountering Jesus that the other disciples told Thomas was a little incredulous after all. Yes, Thomas had heard that the women had seen the risen Jesus, but for Jesus to appear to the disciples in a locked room, as if he could just walk through the wall, was just a little over the top. Maybe the disciples had seen an apparition … isn’t that what they had said when the women had told them they had seen Jesus on the path? It doesn’t surprise me that when Thomas was told of this encounter by the other disciples his response was to say, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in his side, I will not believe.”

But does Thomas’s disbelief mean that he didn’t have faith? For that matter, can a skeptic in any age, including our own, still find a place within the body of the faithful? I sometimes think of myself as a modern day Thomas. Yet I also know that my skepticism has led me to curiosity, which has led to me to inquisitive exploration, which has only deepened my faith.

The Greek words that are translated as “belief” and “faith” have the same root, but they are used in different ways. When Jesus encounters the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof, or the woman who had bleeding for 12 years, or blind Bartimaeus, or the woman of the city he tells them that their “faith” has “saved” them, or made them “well,” or made them “whole.” It is never perfectly clear what Jesus means by “faith” but it has something to do with trusting God.

On the other hand, the doubt of Thomas and others has to do with what seems to be an acceptance as objective reality of an incredulous claim. Feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish is an incredulous claim. Raising Lazarus from the grave after four days is an incredulous claim. Walking on water is an incredulous claim. Rising from the dead and appearing to the disciples in a locked room is an incredulous claim. So, in this scientific age CAN people have doubts about these claims in our Holy Scripture and still have faith?

My answer is YES! I’m not going to try to explain away these stories. I embrace them as “true” … even if they are not necessarily factual. Could you have video taped these events? I don’t think so. Do they report a reality experienced by the people who were witnesses? I’m sure of it. If that sounds contradictory, it is. However, I believe that the truth is written between the lines as well as in black and white. Is there room for the faithful skeptic in the church community today? Yes, just as there was room for doubters amongst the disciples.

Some contemporary Biblical scholars claim that there is a back-story to the attitude that the author of John’s gospel displays towards Thomas. Thomas is mentioned several times in John’s gospel, and on each occasion Thomas is pictured in a negative or pejorative way. When Jesus goes to Lazarus who had died, Thomas seems to miss the point. Later, when Jesus speaks of going to his “Father’s house” Thomas is pictured as ignorant and naive in not “knowing the way.” In the story we heard today Thomas is not with the disciples who are gathered in the room … the implication is that Thomas had something better to do, or that he had forgotten about the meeting, or he was just too frightened to show up. And then Thomas expresses his doubt. Why might the author of John’s gospel imply these things about Thomas?

One theory put forth is that John and Thomas views of who Jesus was were at odds with one another … that John and Thomas were from rival theological and ecclesial perspectives. It is believed by most scholars today that this Gospel of Thomas was written circulating before the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written. The Gospel of Thomas may have been written as early as 25 years after the death of Jesus. However, most scholars believe that John’s gospel was written at least 60 to 70 years after the crucifixion.

What we do know is that in the early church, at the time of the writing of the gospels, there were several different understandings of who Jesus was, and what the events of his life, death, and resurrection meant to those who were gathering in his name. Some people followed Peter and his understanding; others followed John and his conception; and still others followed Thomas. But what was it about Thomas’s insight into Jesus that would have threatened John?

In 1945 a Bedouin shepherd unearthed several pottery jars containing parchment scrolls in Nag Hammadi, an area about 120 miles south of Cairo, Egypt. Among the documents discovered was an ancient copy of the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 “sayings” of Jesus, many of which are also found in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of Thomas has no narrative … there is no birth story, no miracle stories, or healings, and no account of his passion and resurrection … it is just a collection of sayings … as if it were a collection of quotes.

For the Gospel of Thomas, it is what Jesus says, rather than what he does, that is primary. Salvation, for Thomas, comes from Jesus’ teaching, not from his death and resurrection. Under this expression of early Christianity each individual has a divine spark, and consequently, all of us, every single individual, can represent the divine. Conversely, John insists that salvation is only through the Christ. What Thomas sees as available to every individual, to every self, to every soul, John sees as only attributable to Jesus the Christ, the only Son of God, who died and rose again.

To this day both expressions can be found in the Christian faith, often sitting side-by-side. However, in the early church the theology we now take for granted was in its formative stage. Whether John, or Peter, or Thomas, they were all formulating answers to the questions that are still asked today. Who was Jesus? Was he fully human, fully divine, or both? Was his resurrection that of his body or of his spirit? And what do we have to “believe” to have a Christian faith?

The story of Doubting Thomas ends with the verse,

*“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

Another way to say this is, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and are skeptics, and have lots of questions, yet still journey in faith.”

So, what are your doubts? Of what are you skeptical? How has your disbelief caused you to be curious, and therefore driven you to explore your faith? What questions do you still harbor that cause you to wonder? What questions do you have that you are afraid to voice? To what questions do you want clear answers rather than live in the discomfort of not knowing? How have you not seen, yet still have faith on your journey?

Yes, there are religions that have all the answers, and don’t allow the questions. In some expressions of Christianity there is no room for questions, much less doubt. However, I find my curiosity, and the curiosity of others, to drive an exploration that deepens my faith. I encourage you to use your questions … and doubts … to do the same.

Amen.