

From doubt to belief

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2010.

On that first day of the week when Christ arose, the disciples were hiding in fear of persecution by the religious establishment. The reference to their fear of the Jews has been wrongly used as a basis for anti-Semitism. While the religious establishment of that day was Jewish, let us not forget that Jesus and his disciples were Jewish and that the scriptures tell us that it was the Roman authorities, in particular Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Jesus to death. Because they were fearful of persecution from any authority, the disciples met behind locked doors.

To their surprise and relief, Jesus appears among them with the traditional eastern greeting "Peace be with you." This form of greeting became part of the culture of the worship traditions in the formation of the early church.

The gospel tells us that in commissioning the disciples, Jesus "breathed on them." Air, wind and breath in the Hebrew and Greek describe the nature and imagery of God's Holy Spirit. In Genesis, we read of how God breathed life into Adam as the first man to become a living soul. In Ezekiel, we read how God called upon the four winds to breathe life into the dry bones of the dead. In a few weeks we will read about the invocation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to breathe life and power into the forming church.

In giving them the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus empowers his disciples to declare God's forgiveness by saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Those same words were said over me as I knelt before my bishop at my ordination to the priesthood. Part of our calling as Christians is to proclaim God's forgiveness to a world greatly in need of reconciliation. Those who are repentant are assured of forgiveness and those who refuse to repent do so at their own peril. Our mission is to represent the heart, mind, and hands of Christ to bring people from alienation to reconciliation.

During those dramatic events of that first Easter, all of the disciples are witnesses to the risen Christ, all that is, except Thomas. He has the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, having the dubious distinction of missing out on the momentous event of our faith. You can imagine his disappointment when he realizes what he missed. Understandably he is feeling skeptical and cautious and doesn't want to appear to be gullible. He wants to be shown proof. He wants to see the resurrected Christ face to face and see the marks in his hands and his side before he will believe. When he does have the opportunity to see Jesus for himself, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" This is all the proof he needs. How happy are those who believe without such proof. How sad when people become disappointed and question their faith and stay away from the church. It is at those times of doubt and uncertainty in our faith journey that we need the support of the faith community. The least productive thing to do is to stay away. It is here you will find those who are going through their own times of doubt and questioning as well as those who have come to the assurance in some answers. I am skeptical of those who have all the answers and none of the questions. Mature Christianity requires critical thinking and an inquiring mind.

We have to admire Thomas for his honesty in regard to his skepticism. He will not accept the testimony of others; he has to see for himself. His very honesty and skepticism becomes the foundation of his profound belief. To be honest about our own doubts and uncertainties is the beginning of coming to a stronger faith. In 1850, the English writer Alfred, Lord Tennyson believed that we come to a stronger faith through our own doubts and skepticism when he wrote:

*There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe, me, than in half the creeds.*

In Memoriam Canto 96

Would that each of us could arrive at such a strong conviction about our own faith! I find that there is so much in life that is inexplicable and for which there is no explanation that leaves me bewildered. I have found that I can accept many things on faith that I never have been able to understand or explain. I have yet to figure out why some people behave the way they do, why they come at life with such opposing views. I do have a profound belief that I might live into the answers in time, but for the present I can be content to live with the unanswered questions.

While I have learned to accept the fact some people are so unforgiving and will never change their minds, I can still love and care for them as people of God.

Within the Christian community, we have much to gain from the skeptics who challenge accepted religious tradition. I love tradition while at the same time know that tradition is the living faith of the dead while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. It is important that we learn to articulate our questions about tradition so that we can affirm what we come to believe to be true. Our doubts can become our strength and we need not be threatened by the skepticism of others. Our faith must be our own and not be dependent upon others. For our own faith to have credibility, we must think it through on our own.

Instead of being a spoiler, honest doubt can be the best means of working through the great mysteries of faith and life. In the end, it can lead us toward a stronger belief in the reality of the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to provide us with a firm foundation.