

EASTER 2C

April 11, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 5:27—32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4—8

John 20:19—31

Did any of you ever have a nickname while you were growing up? How did you feel about that nickname?

I had a nickname... in fact, I had a couple of nicknames. I lived in Kentucky, along the banks of the Ohio River, from the first through eighth grades. Several times a day we'd see tugboats and barges going up and down the river. One of the boys who lived down the street from us noticed how I was always tagging along after my sister, so he nicknamed me "tugboat," like those little boats that always go along behind the barges. The rest of the kids picked up on this nickname, and soon everyone was calling me "Tugboat."

Unfortunately, as I entered middle school I began to gain weight. As I got bigger, the kids stopped calling me "Tugboat" and started calling me "Barge," because, I suppose, they thought I now more closely resembled the larger boats. Yeah, it hurt. I was awfully glad when we moved away from there and I could shed that nickname, and even more glad when I finally shed those extra pounds.

We would hate being treated the way the church has treated Thomas. If an unfair nickname stuck to us like Velcro, we would resent it. Getting people to stop calling us a name we hate can prove frustrating. At least one person never seems to drop it. If it's not a nickname, maybe it's a constant reminder of something we wish hadn't happened.

The church has done something similar to Thomas. We've plastered the nickname "Doubting Thomas" on him for centuries. Who would want to carry that nickname forever? Who of us wants everyone to remember where we started out, not where we ended up? We don't treat the "Beloved Disciple" that way. He didn't believe until he saw the grave clothes in the empty tomb, but we don't call him "the Disbelieving Disciple." We don't do that to Peter. He denied Jesus three times. He didn't endure centuries of the label "Denying Peter." We cut him some slack. We remember what he did after the big denials.

We haven't been as kind to Thomas. We seldom mention Thomas without the nickname. From our standpoints, we miss the boat when we label this disciple "Doubting Thomas." He actually has much to teach us. Thomas declared, "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.*" In fact, the nickname "Doubting Thomas" isn't accurate at all. He did not just express doubt; he expressed *disbelief*.

But who would blame Thomas for his disbelief? After all, did the disciples believe when Mary Magdalene came and told them that Jesus was not in the tomb? No – Peter and another disciple took off running, to go see for themselves. Sure enough, Jesus wasn't there. Wasn't that what Mary had told them?

So what happened after Peter and the other disciple discovered Jesus wasn't in the tomb? We're told that Mary Magdalene stays outside the tomb, weeping, when she looks inside the tomb and sees two angels. They ask her why she's crying, and she says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

At that moment, she turns around and sees another man standing there. It's Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him. She supposes he's the gardener, and asks him if he's taken Jesus' body away, and if so, where he put it. Then Jesus speaks her name – "Mary!" – and in that instant she recognizes him.

So we're told that Mary goes and tells the disciples "I have seen the Lord." She tells them what Jesus had said to her. How did the disciples respond to this word? Well, we're not exactly told what they said, but we're certainly told what they did – they went and hid themselves behind closed doors.

Are these the actions of a group of people who truly believe that their Lord has been raised from the dead? I think not. I think they didn't believe Mary, either. In demanding to see for himself, Thomas responded no differently to the news of the risen Lord than had the rest of the disciples. If this group of men were alive today, we'd probably say they were all from Missouri, the "Show Me" state. They had to see for themselves to truly believe.

And see they did. That evening, when they were hiding behind closed doors, Jesus came and stood among them. He showed them his hands, and his side. And the text tells us that it was THEN the disciples rejoiced – not when they first saw Jesus stand among them, but after they had seen the signs in his hands and side.

But Thomas was not among the disciples that night. When he returns, he's told the news, "We have seen the Lord!" and he responds with unbelief. And what sign does Thomas ask for, in order to believe? The very same sign the rest of disciples had received – to see the risen Jesus for himself.

Remember what I said to you earlier, that this nickname “Doubting Thomas” is actually a misnomer? Listen to verse 25 again: “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.*” As I've already discussed at length, Thomas didn't just express doubt, he expressed disbelief.

This raises a question, then, for us today: Is there a difference between doubt and unbelief? If so, what is that difference?

I say that in order to move from unbelief to belief requires faith. Thomas makes that move, when the risen Lord appears to him and invites him to touch his hands and his side. Thomas sees and believes, and makes one of the greatest confessions of faith in the entire Bible: “My Lord and my God!” Jesus responds: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

And indeed, blessed are those of us who believe yet who have not seen the risen Lord. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have come to believe the truth of the witness of the apostles. As we confess on Easter morning, “Christ is risen indeed!”

When we take a look at this story of the so-called “Doubting Thomas,” we sometimes come to erroneously believe that faith and doubt are two contrary ideas. We somehow think that doubting is a bad thing.

But, we can have faith and yet have doubts. Theologian Paul Tillich said that “Doubt is not the opposite of faith but an element of faith.” When we come to church on Sunday, we are not asked to check our brains at the door. We are asked to honestly and seriously engage the Biblical texts, using all the good brains God gave us. And, yes, sometimes this can lead to doubt. Tillich also said that as one grows in faith, “The old faith must die, eaten away by doubts, but only so that a new and deeper faith may be born.” Doubt is not a bad thing. In fact, doubt is an integral part of a growing and deepening life of faith.

Theologian William Barclay had this to say about the role of doubt in faith:

There is more ultimate faith in the man who insists on being sure than the man who glibly repeats things which he has never thought out, and which he does not really believe. It is doubt like that which in the end arrives at certainty.... Thomas doubted in order to become sure; and when he did become sure, his surrender to certainty was complete. If a man fights his way through his doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, he has attained to a certainty that the man who unthinkingly accepts can never reach.

Another theologian put it this way: “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. Doubt keeps faith awake and moving.” Doubt keeps us searching the texts to come to a fuller understanding of the God who has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther once said that having doubt is evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives; without the Holy Spirit, who reveals the risen Christ to us, we would not know what it is that we are doubting!

Thanks be to God that we, like those first disciples, have been breathed upon by God's Holy Spirit, which works in our hearts all throughout our lives, creating faith – often through the use of our own doubts and unbelief.

Amen.

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