

Second Sunday in Easter  
Year A, RCL  
April 19, 2020  
North Fork Ministries

**John 20:19-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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You may remember a few years ago, the publication of a book called *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. The book, published without her consent, consists primarily of correspondence between Teresa and her spiritual guides and superiors over a period of 66 years. It reveals a side of Mother Teresa of which the public was unaware – revealing that Teresa was filled with doubt and uncertainty about what she believed and her connection with God. Typical was this note to one of her confessors. "Jesus has a very special love for you," she assured him "[But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak..."

The revelation that even Mother Teresa experienced what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul" has dismayed many – shattering our idealized image of a flawless and forever faithful follower of Christ.

I, for one, was rather relieved to see it. Because even though I too am a great admirer of this saintly woman, I was relieved to learn that even she could be counted in the ranks of the world's doubters. It seems that Thomas, of whom we just read, is in excellent company. Much has been made, over the centuries, of this doubter Thomas. The disciple who would not accept that Christ had risen. He declared, famously, "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." And with those words, forever labeled every Thomas that followed a "doubting Thomas." We tend to forget that the other disciples remained skeptical of Mary Magdalene's account of the risen Christ and were hiding, fearfully behind locked doors, and that they also did not believe until Jesus showed them the marks on his hands and side. And in condemning Thomas for his doubting, we are ignoring Jesus own doubt-filled prayer on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me". Indeed, doubters are in very good company.

In fact, I think that it is the "true believers" from whom we have the most to fear – those who profess to have found the truth, those who "without a doubt" know that they are right. Those who make claims like, "The Bible said it, I believe it, and that settles it." Give me a doubter any day. Frederick Buechner once wrote that, in the search for God, "without room for doubt, there would be no room for me."

A few years ago there was a wave of books attacking Christianity and religion in general, books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* or Sam Harris', *The End of Faith*. Such writings seem to me to bring the same sort of certainty to the question of the nature and existence of God that our fundamentalist brothers and sisters bring to their understanding of religion. There seems to be a calcification of thought at both extremes, a lack of understanding that the conception of God that representatives of each camp either attack or uphold is not the only way of thinking about how the Divine is made present in the world. Religion becomes an easy target, when the God that is being assailed is the omnipotent, omniscient, white haired and bearded King on a throne in the clouds. I'd have to say, I'm more than a little skeptical about the existence of that kind of God as well.

One of history's great doubters, so great in fact that the name for the school of philosophy he founded, the Cynics, has moved into our language as a label for the highly skeptical, jaded doubter – was Diogenes. Diogenes, writing in the fourth century, held that God was like air, saying "that which has intelligence is what men call air, and that all things have their course steered by it and that it has power over all things. For this very thing I hold to be a God and to reach everywhere and to dispose everything and to be in everything." The Cynical life was one that rejected striving after worldly success, suggesting that we find contentment with what we have, and not spending our lives chasing after elusive worldly goals.

Diogenes wisdom attracted no less a figure than Alexander the Great, who when he wasn't seeking new worlds to conquer, oddly liked to listen to Diogenes. The story is told of Alexander, impressed with the philosopher's teachings, asking him, "What can I give you? I'll give you any gift." This was a kind of trap, because if Diogenes accepted money or an expensive gift he would be turning away from the cynical way of life. But Diogenes, often depicted lying on his side enjoying the sun's rays, answered "Yes, I can think of something you can do for me. Could you step out of my sun?"

And maybe this is why it is so important that we don't give up doubting. The dominant culture would have us believe, whole heartedly, without a doubt, in the values it thrusts

upon us. A belief that we can buy our way to happiness. That peace can be achieved through violence. That we gain security by excluding our neighbors. That hate is more powerful than love. Jesus was the biggest doubter I know. Rejecting the status quo. Rejecting the established order. Jesus doubted the wisdom handed down by Imperial Rome, doubted the primacy of their authority. Of course, as we learned last week, doubting the power of Pilate, had severe consequences for Jesus, as doubting power certainly can.

We are surrounded by religious certainty – by voices that claim to have found the answer, that claim to possess the truth. That is why it is refreshing to hear a religious voice like that of the Dalai Lama. A voice that has remained faithful to a commitment to nonviolence despite living over 60 years in exile and watching, from a distance, as his people, the Tibetans are enslaved. His days must be filled with doubt. But his doubt is not a rejection of his faith.

In fact, an indication of the strength of his faith, is found in his advice to those in the West who wish to convert to Buddhism. He suggests that instead, they should return to their own tradition, to seek wisdom within their own cultural roots, their own history. He teaches that the groundedness that we have in our own religious upbringing, would enable us to find greater depth of faith than we could find by starting over with a different approach to spirituality.

What a reasoned and faithful response to the evangelical fervor we see in our country! It is the voice of the doubter, who says to the religious or political leader who lays claim to absolute truth, “Could you step aside, you’re blocking my sun.”