

**Sermon Preached April 26, 2009  
Year B, Second Sunday of Easter  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
North Andover, Massachusetts  
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson**

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

She stands like a specter in her long black coat. The heavy lighting streaks across the stage. The contestants stand at their podiums in a semi-circle around her as she peers menacingly over her glasses. “You have 120 seconds,” she barks, “to answer these questions. After that we will vote on who is the weakest link.” The contestants shift uncomfortably on their feet. They are at her mercy as the barrage of questions begins. “Peter!” she calls, “Who was crucified on Good Friday?” “Jesus Christ!” he answers. “Correct.” “John, who condemned him to death?” “Pontius Pilate!” John says. “Correct.” “Thomas,” “Bank!” he calls, “Thomas, Did Jesus rise from the dead,” she asks? “I . . . I don't know,” answers Thomas miserably. “Wrong!” She announces, “The correct answer is ‘yes.’ You are the weakest link. Goodbye!”

Poor Thomas! He gets such a bad rap. Peter is the rock. John is the one whom Jesus loves. But Thomas, he's the weakest link. He doubts the resurrection.

It must've been hard for him. All his friends get to see the risen Lord that evening in the locked house, but Thomas misses out. It's like that story about a three-year-old boy who stays home from church with a babysitter one Palm Sunday. When the family returns home carrying palm branches, he asks what they're for. His mother explains, "People held them over Jesus' head as he walked by." "Wouldn't you know it," the boy fumes, "The one Sunday I don't go, he shows up!"

Thomas is the same way. A miracle has happened and Thomas misses out. In response he makes a very sensible and reasonable statement. "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" [John 20:25]. My guess is that if any of the other disciples had missed the big moment, they too would have had a hard time believing. Thomas isn't unusually skeptical; he's like every other reasonable person.

How many of us would unquestioningly believe that a dear friend has risen from the dead? In fact, maybe Thomas is on to something.

"Several years ago the Gallup organization did a survey of 'The Unchurched American.' Approximately half said that they could imagine circumstances that might lead them to become actively involved in a religious community. The survey reported the single greatest factor for becoming involved as 'finding a pastor or rabbi with whom I can openly discuss my

religious doubts.’ Thomas is the patron saint of questioners... Faith is formed in the midst of questions.”<sup>1</sup> We all have doubts, we all have Thomas moments, but church should be the place where we can find the answers, not a place to fear the questions.

The Bible is full of examples of doubt, of people questioning God. Moses expresses doubt that he’s the right man for the job to release his people from slavery. Psalm 43:2 asks, “For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off?” In the gospel of Luke Jesus tells Peter to lower his nets into the water to catch fish. Peter doesn’t believe him and protests.

Finally he does what he’s asked, and catches so many fish that his nets begin to break. It’s only then that Peter believes in Jesus. He too suffers doubts.

In our reading today, Jesus himself doesn’t condemn Thomas for questioning him. Instead he allows Thomas the space and opportunity to question him. To feel his side and hands. By doing so, Jesus allows Thomas the non-judgmental space and time to come to faith.

There’s a great newspaper ad for the Episcopal Church. It shows a picture of a man from the chest up, wearing a coat and tie, but his mouth has been taped over. The caption at the top reads, “There’s only one problem

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Craig M. Kallio, St. Stephen’s, Oak Ridge, TN, as found in The Anglican Digest, Easter 2002

with religions that have all the answers. They don't allow questions." The fine print reads, "If you sometimes have questions about God and the meaning of life, come and join the search for answers in the fellowship of our church."<sup>2</sup>

I'm happy to belong to a church, which not only allows, but encourages, questions. It's through facing the hard questions that we come to deep faith. Not that we should get stuck in a rut of cynicism and doubt. But that through faithful and honest doubt, with a desire to come to truth, we can take great strides on our spiritual journeys. The theologian Paul Tillich says, "Serious doubt is confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of the concern."

There are some Christian traditions which discourage questions because they believe them to be disrespectful, or because the church prefers easy and pat answers. Doubting God or having an unsteady faith is seen as the work of the Devil. To them faith is a once and for all proposition, that we are fully formed and matured as Christians the moment we come to faith. But that's not so! We all grow and change throughout our lives and as a result so does our faith. Sometimes new experiences call into question our faith as it has been expressed thus far. We then need the freedom, space, and opportunity to reexamine it in a new light. Through this re-examination, doubt, and

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<sup>2</sup> Church Ad Project catalog.

questioning, we can come to a deeper and more profound faith. That's the great irony! It is through doubt that we can often achieve the deepest faith.

Our God is a very big God. She can take care of herself. We need not fear asking questions. God is big enough to handle them. When someone feels they have to 'protect' God from doubt, it means they must not think very highly of God. God and his actions don't need protecting. If one doesn't believe God's actions can handle scrutiny under a microscope, then they must doubt the perfection of God's work. God is big enough to handle all questions.

Church is a great collection of people, from all walks of life, with all kinds of experiences, but all hungering for a deeper relationship and understanding of God. No one of us has all the answers, including your rector, but all of us have some of the answers. Church is the place where we come to ask our questions and express our doubt with other people on the journey. Chances are that in community we can together find answers.

Thomas is not the weakest link; he is a very human link, very much like the rest of us. Doubting is often a part of the faith journey. Thomas has doubts, but has the honesty and integrity to share them with the group. He has the desire to find the truth. And when he sees Christ, he has the courage to admit he was wrong. Most all of us have Thomas moments. Instead of

denying them, may we use them as catalysts to a deeper faith and closer relationship with our God. Amen.