

September 11, 2016
The Feast of St. Thomas (trans.)
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Habakkuk 2:1-4
Psalm 126
Hebrews 10:35-11:1
John 20:24-29

Three guys walk into a bar: an optimist, a pessimist, and a cynic. They sit down in a booth where a glass of water remains. The optimist remarks that the glass is half full and the pessimist says, "No, it's half empty." The cynic says, "Who cares? Do you know what fish do in that stuff?"¹

At the watering hole that is St. Thomas's, today is Welcome Back Sunday, the first Sunday of the program year. The choir is back, and the schedule is heating up. As Simon and I were planning liturgies for today, we decided to *claim* our patron saint and invite the disciple commonly known as Doubting Thomas to come out of that locked house and to settle in the pews with us, for this service and for our 5 p.m. Evensong. Therefore, instead of the readings officially appointed for this Sunday, we just heard the ones for the Feast of St. Thomas. On the Episcopal Church calendar, Thomas's Feast Day is actually December 21. What with Advent and Christmas, Thomas usually gets overlooked. But not this year, at least not here.

I subscribe to the *Prairie Home Companion* "Pretty Good Joke of the Day." I open my workday with a joke; I consider this to be an important spiritual practice. The timely joke I began this sermon with arrived in my email inbox this past Thursday. Coincidence? It depends on who you ask. Cynics, skeptics, and doubters—it's a club to which I sometimes subscribe, and maybe you do, too. I spend more time at the clubhouse during periods of hard times or bad news. If that's where Thomas is as our Gospel reading opens, it would be completely understandable.

Let's have some background. It's the tenth day after the crucifixion; it's the Sunday after the Sunday of the resurrection. For the second Sunday in a row, the disciples are gathered in a house behind doors that are closed and locked. Thomas is with them, but he was absent when Jesus dropped by the previous Sunday, bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's been a roller-coaster of a ride for all the disciples. But because Thomas missed Jesus, his car is still in hand-clinching, stomach-churning freefall.

If Thomas is reluctant to believe the witness of the other disciples, one can hardly blame him. After all, they haven't always been the most reliable colleagues. Thomas is a member of Jesus' inner circle, one of "the twelve," which now numbers eleven thanks to Judas. Thomas wants and even needs to experience what the other disciples already have. I would feel the same way. Fortunately, for him and for us, Thomas gets his chance. Jesus stops in, shows Thomas his wounds, and then says to him, "Do not doubt, but believe."

"Do not doubt, but believe." This sentence would be a great advertising slogan: it's succinct and catchy and ... a little misleading. To say more, as we try to understand what's really going on here, there are some translation problems worth noting. First, the words translated as both "doubt" and "believe" stem the same Greek word. The word translated "believe" is *pistos*, and the word translated "doubt" is *apistos*. In Greek, an "a" in front of a word means to be without that thing. It works like the English words *typical* and *atypical*, or *moral* and *amoral*. A fairer translation of our advertising slogan would be the less catchy, "Do not be *unbelieving*, but believe."

Another thing: the translation of *pistos* to *belief* is just a little too simple. The Greek word *pistos* is actually used only *here* in John's Gospel. It's seldom used in the other three gospels, either. But when it is, it's translated as "faithful" and used to describe a devoted servant. One dictionary defines *pistos* as being "of persons who show themselves faithful in the transaction of business, the execution of commands, or the discharge of official duties."² It's less about opinion and more about action.

This shifts the meaning of Jesus' interaction with Thomas. Jesus' instruction less to do with what Thomas should be *thinking*, and more to do with what he should be *doing*. Jesus wants Thomas to be a devoted servant, someone who provides faithful service to him by transacting his business in the world. Jesus could be saying something like, "Do not be unhelpful, but helpful."

Now, one more thing: Jesus extends this message far beyond Thomas. He goes on to say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." A clearer but clunky version of this might be, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet are faithful in transacting my business."

To shift gears, I expect that many ministers are preaching today about September 11, 2001. I only want to give it a brief mention here. Maybe that's because I experienced the events of 9/11 at more of a distance than did many of you. I was living in Vermont at the time, and not here in New York City's backyard. But I think it's more than that. After all, directly or indirectly, every American alive today—and perhaps every person on the planet—has been affected by the conflict that began with the events of that day. I can't think of 9/11 without feeling grief that my 21-year-old daughter barely remembers a time when our nation was not at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. You may still have grief over much more personal losses than that. 9/11 seems to have segued into other crises, near and far, that are becoming ever more pressing. Turn on the news at pretty much any time, and you'll find plenty of reasons to be skeptical or cynical or doubtful.

In response, I think Jesus is saying, "Don't give into it, just follow me." Don't turn away, but also don't give in to the paralysis of skepticism, or cynicism, or doubt, or even fear. Behave as if resurrection is all around, waiting at arm's length for us to reach out and touch. Behave as if we carry resurrection, for others to reach out and touch. The true blessing is that our actions will help to make it so.

If you're over the age of 40, you may remember the old AT&T advertising slogan, "Reach out and touch someone." A typical television commercial featured a brief yet engagingly sentimental tale of grandparents talking to far-away grandchildren, wrapped up with the jingle. [*Sing: Reach out, reach out and touch someone / Reach out, come on, and just say, "Hi"*] It seems so quaint now, being lured to make a long-distance phone call. In case you don't remember, back in the day, making a long-distance phone call was a faintly exotic luxury. My grandmother made few of them in her lifetime. Now, smartphones at the ready, we reach out and touch someone all the time. Mobile technology is conducive to quantity—but quality? Mmm, not so much.

Sometimes—and certainly during this election season—even I need an antidote to cynicism and skepticism and doubt. The joke of the day helps, but a better antidote is to be found right here, where we really can reach out and touch someone.

St. Thomas's seems to attract a lot of people who are cynical, skeptical, or doubtful. Maybe that's because of our history and our location. Regardless, some people come here because it's a safe place to question all sorts of aspects of traditional Christianity. A lot of people come here carrying wounds from their previous faith traditions. This is a place where questions are encouraged and wounds are healed. We touch and we are touched. That might even be why we find so much joy together. During the course of today's reading, our Doubting Thomas offers this Gospel's strongest confession of Jesus' status: "My lord and my God." Like some of us, he needs a little help to get there. Thomas is truly the saint for us.

Jesus saves Thomas from himself. Jesus offers up his resurrected body, complete with wounds that are still raw, so that Thomas can witness it for himself. But Jesus' agenda is bigger than Thomas. He essentially tells Thomas to offer *his* bodily self to the task ahead. Doing the work of the resurrected Christ, Thomas witnesses visibly to others, that resurrection is real. Those others will use their own bodies to carry that witness to others, who will carry it to others, from generation to generation to generation, until it arrives at each of us. We are St. Thomas's Church, New Haven, and we are so much more. We are the disciples who receive witness from the past generations, and who witness for the next generations, offering our bodies to the call of Jesus Christ. We witness to others, who will witness to others, who will witness to yet others. But we can't do it alone. We're kind of like electric cars, in that we need to come home, once a week or so, for a recharge. Recharged, we carry our witness into the world.

As the program year kicks off, there is much excitement in the air at the Church and at the Day School. Your Church leadership is poised to consider the ways in which our financial future can be secured. There are initiatives to reinvigorate old ministries and start new ones. The Church and the Day School are collaborating in ways not seen in decades, if ever.

In a few minutes, we're going to commission Robbie Laughton as our seminarian intern. He has been with us for two years in the Adult Choir; for the next nine months he will sing in the choir *and* assume responsibilities at the Church and the Day School. Robbie will stand before us, embodying the *transformative* touch of the resurrected Christ, and the *upholding* power of the Holy Spirit. Today, he is the witness who reminds us that we, too, are continually blessed with those are gifts. May God our creator help us to transcend our doubt, our skepticism, and our cynicism. May God our creator help us to see and to act.

Notes

¹ [*Pretty Good Joke of the Day from A Prairie Home Companion*, September 8, 2016, attributed to Eddie Hagler of Oklahoma City, Okla., received via email.

² πιστός (pistos), Strong's Lexicon, G4103 (with a quote from the included *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*), *Blue Letter Bible*, available online at <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G4103&t=KJV> (accessed September 10, 2016).