

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Second Sunday of Easter, Year A, April 23, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Doubt and Belief”
John 20:19-31

everyone knows the term “Doubting Thomas” even if they don’t know its connection to the Bible or to this Gospel passage we read today; yet, it is an unfair epithet; compare Peter: he denied Jesus; that is certainly worse than doubting, yet he isn’t called “Denying Peter”; even though Peter did deny Jesus, he did other more faithful things, and is remembered for those

the same kind of thing is true for Thomas too; this one event of doubting is not the only action of Thomas’ we have on record; Thomas is the only disciple aware that Jesus will die in Jerusalem and is still willing to go to and die with him; he said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him”; we just heard this from John ch 11, three weeks ago; and look closely at what actually happened once Thomas sees Jesus, he takes less time being convinced of who Jesus is than the other disciples did; the other disciples were speechless at Jesus’ appearance among them, Thomas is the only one to speak; what he says is to affirm Jesus as “My Lord and my God,” and he does not insist on touching Jesus’ wounds; these are not the words or actions of a ‘doubter,’ so we should remember Thomas differently

I sense that what bothers some people about this passage isn’t so much Thomas’ actions, as it is the idea of doubt itself; perhaps because the opposite of ‘to doubt’ is ‘to believe’ and believing takes such a central role in Christianity, esp. in Protestant Christianity; why so?; well, one of the errors of the extremists at the time of the protestant Reformation was to automatically take the opposite side of everything the Roman Catholic Church did: Catholics had liturgy, so those Protestants had no liturgy; Catholics used vestments, so those Protestants used street clothes; Catholics had a church hierarchy, so those Protestants saw every church as independent; you still see these characteristics in some Protestant churches, but not in all, and not in the Episcopal Church

at the time of the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church was putting much emphasis on ‘works,’ meaning largely ‘giving money to the church,’ while

Reformers put a counter-emphasis on 'faith,' meaning largely 'believing a certain subset of Christian doctrines'; that's why we have so many denominations, with each differing by minor shades of doctrine; and for several centuries, fighting each other over these differences

another danger, to some Christians, is that if you doubt anything of the faith, or in the Bible, or in what the church teaches, you call everything into question; that's not necessarily so; that's not the approach the Episcopal Church and the Anglican tradition has taken; the Church of England at the time of the Reformation did not automatically do the opposite of the Roman Catholic Church, but weighed its actions and beliefs by the Bible; if something worked and was not contrary to Bible, it was OK to keep; that's why much of our liturgy resembles parts of Catholic worship; yet we do not have a hierarchy to extent of the pope; nor do we venerate Mary beyond seeing her as an example to follow; it's because these two things are not warranted by the Bible

the Episcopal Church takes doubt to be a good thing; not just in and of itself, but as a means for every believer to be engaged personally about their faith and their religious practice; I did not use the words "to be sure about their faith" on purpose; think, did Jesus ever ask people to be 'sure' of anything, other than recognizing him for who he was?; much of his engagement with people was to make them unsure of other matters; over and over again, Jesus said, "follow me" and "do as I do" -- invitations that call to action, more than to belief

Episcopalians do not believe it is the church's role to tell you what to believe; the church is here to help you discover that for yourself, in community, and to practice your faith, in community, and to be engaged in ministry, in community; we do not require assent to any particular set of beliefs outside of the core understanding of who Jesus is and how we are to follow him; meaning: anyone is free to worship with us who chooses, without any required profession of faith or without any particular interpretation of the Bible; we are a richer church when we do have people with a wide range of beliefs, worshipping together, and doing ministry together

what about the Creeds?, you might ask; these are core Christian affirmations; what are you asked personally to affirm as an Episcopalian, in Baptism and Confirmation?: to renounce Satan, evil, & sin; and turn to Christ, accept his

grace, & follow him; the Baptismal Covenant, the question and answer form of the Apostles' Creed, is followed with a list of the kind of actions that must follow necessarily in our lives, if we hold these beliefs: continue in the apostles' fellowship, seek and serve Christ in all persons, etc. (BCP page 304); or as we pray today in the Collect of the day: that we may show forth in [our] lives what [we] profess by [our] faith (BCP page 224); the creeds are summaries of Church's beliefs; no one is required to understand or assent to them in every detail; they are not meant to be spoken as a requirement or a test of your faith, but a reminder of the larger faith tradition in which we share

in the end, what was important for Thomas, and what is important for us, is not what we assent to in our minds, but what we follow through with, as a result of our faith, in our lives; doubt and faith, like love, are not judged by their emotional or intellectual content, but by the actions which follow from them; regardless of what you believe or don't believe, what matters is how you demonstrate your love of God, how you demonstrate your love of other people, and how you demonstrate your love of God's creation