

HOMILY EASTER 2B 15 APRIL 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

The figure of doubting Thomas is intriguing. I suspect many of us sympathize w/ his skepticism and pessimism. His doubt towards the resurrection report has a contemporary flavor. The notion of a man rising from the dead is patently incredible. So there is a little of doubting Thomas in many of us. Yet despite our sympathies w/ him, he is the goat of the gospel story. Thomas is rebuked by Jesus for demanding to see before he believes. Blessed are those who have not seen, but have believed! Implicitly, Thomas's sympathizers are chided too.

We like to think that if we saw the risen Lord, we would believe. But would we? Just imagine, if a man walked in here claiming to be Jesus, complete w/ wounds in hands, side, and feet, would that compel you to believe? There would be many ways to explain such an appearance w/o embracing the Christian creed that Jesus is truly risen. Moreover, none of us has seen the historical Jesus, so we don't even know what he looked like; the gospel records, after all, did not include photos! Indeed, the first witnesses of the risen Lord, those who had seen him face to face, were slow to believe he really was who he said he was. In many accounts they did not recognize him: the 2 disciples headed for Emmaus pegged him for a hapless Passover pilgrim grossly ignorant of the local news; Mary Magdalene mistook him for a gardener; other disciples feared he was a ghost. So if the risen Lord should happen to appear to us in the flesh, esp. nowadays at such a far remove from the historical event of his death, I suspect we would not know what to make of this strange figure.

Furthermore, believing that Jesus is risen is much more than seeing him alive on earth. Seeing is not believing after all. The first disciples finally came to acknowledge that the man standing before them was the same Jesus who had actually died on the cross on Good Friday. But to believe in the risen Lord involves a lot more than merely affirming that this man who died crucified was simply resuscitated 3 days later. Believing in the sense of the Catholic faith means professing Jesus to be our Lord and our God, as Thomas declared. That is, Jesus was not simply brought back to normal earthly life after being dead. Rather, he was elevated to a new level of communion with the divine, such that in his human nature he was raised to the Father's right hand, never to die again. This exaltation is a reality which can never be perceived w/ the naked eye; it is the stuff of faith. So whether one sees the risen Lord or not, belief is a subsequent leap of faith founded on trust in Jesus' word and the Church's witness.

The upshot of all this is that Jesus expects us to believe on the basis of the testimony of the Church, the believing community. Blessed are those who have not seen, but have believed on the basis of the witness of the family of believers. This act of faith involves a greater recognition of Christ's power. It's not a mere man that we're trusting here, but someone who works through the community he founded in a manner much more astounding than any miracle he accomplished during his earthly life. You see, the Church, the people of God, a community which has endured 2000 years and stretches across the entire globe, could never have come into existence by mere human power. Man-made inventions, be they families, nations, cultures, or empires, eventually disintegrate and go the way of all flesh. And so the Church, so storied and

diversified even in her unity, so obviously beset by human weakness and sin, yet so remarkably enduring and unified in her proclamation of the gospel, can only be explained by appealing to her divine origin. Put more plainly, the Catholic Church simply could never have gotten this big and lasted this long unless God were keeping her alive. Our Church has been created and sustained by supernatural power emanating from her divine founder Jesus Christ. That's the meaning of that curious gesture in the gospel where Jesus breathes on the disciples in the upper room: the Spirit which has brought him back to life becomes the vital principle of the Church as well. So believing that Jesus is truly risen necessarily requires believing that he is also working through his Church which bears witness to him.

A second challenge implicit in the gospel selection involves the duty of the believing community to the doubting Thomas's among us. I speak here of people who reject the Church's proclamation, in particular of people who have left the Church. Now folks like Thomas can be particularly difficult to re-evangelize. Folks who were once members of the church but have drifted off can be hard to bring back into the fold. They often have a deeply felt motive for leaving the Church: they may have been hurt by a representative of the Church; they may have not received adequate catechesis, so when they grew up they discarded Jesus as just another fairy tale like the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy; they may have gotten so busy w/ other activities that they neglected to make time for God. I suspect most of us know folks like this--friends, family, coworkers, neighbors. For whatever reason, they just don't buy into the gospel anymore. They insist on some compelling evidence to change their mind. It's a widespread problem, by the way; the Pope has established a special pontifical council, the Council for the New Evangelization, whose avowed mission is to bring back the millions of former Catholics who have left the church in droves over the past several decades.

It's not stated why Thomas was absent when the Lord first appeared in the upper room. But the believing community brought him the happy news. He didn't receive it favorably. Perhaps he was hurt that the Lord didn't bother to appear to him too, what w/ Thomas having been a disciple who stuck with the Lord through the hard times, and even attended the Last Supper. Why did Jesus appear to everyone but him? I suspect that Thomas's words were rather painful for his fellow disciples to hear as well, for he discounted the validity of his their witness. Nonetheless, the believing community didn't give up on Thomas. And so they brought him to the upper room the next Sunday. And Jesus appeared. And Thomas believed.

The challenge for us as a believing community is not to give up on our errant friends. It can be easy to write them off. But we're not allowed to do so. Loving others means sharing the good news of salvation with them, because the gospel is the best gift we can give anyone. So we have to be witnesses faithful in both word and deed, people filled w/ the joy and peace of Easter, a joy and peace that come from devout participation in the sacraments and prayers of the Church. Let's pray that the risen Lord will fortify our witness to Easter so that the faith of our brothers and sisters may be revived and all will join in common praise of our risen Savior.