

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2021

Lectionary Year B: John 20:19-31

If the Thomas of today's Gospel text stepped into a time machine and found himself in the twenty-first century among a certain subset of American evangelical Christians, he might have a tough time. You see, Thomas has been (in this preacher's opinion) misunderstood for centuries. He has been called "Doubting Thomas," even to the point of being vilified as a person whom any Christian should never aspire to be.

Yet I can't help but think of the many ways that it's better to be a hero of doubt than to be a hero of a blind, unquestioning faith. Much of the difficulty we have in this country today in terms of engaging in rational, civil conversations is due, in part, to persons of "faith" who consider their fidelity to the Scriptures to be so absolute that they wish to unravel the entire foundation of the scientific method along with what was for years the finest educational system in the world. When supposedly well-meaning Christians provide us images of dinosaurs hopping aboard Noah's Ark, we might just want to ask, "Does this even make any sense?"

That's what Thomas's question would be...

But you can see the absurd conclusions that a rigid, unquestioning faith comes to. According to a segment of American Christians, we cannot call ourselves Christian, study science, and do so in good

faith all at the same time. No, we must believe that God put the dinosaur bones in the ground in order to trick mankind into believing in science. Folks, I attended a Lutheran school, and we studied scientifically-responsible biology, chemistry, and physics...not, for example, the pseudo-science of creationist-based arguments that the Earth is only six thousand years old. My science teacher at Oak Grove Lutheran -- Milan Alby (of blessed memory) -- would have nothing to do with such poppycock!

But where I could grow up with the blessing of being taught actual science at a private, Lutheran school, not every child in America today can count on the same blessing...sadly, even in a public school. Over the past couple decades or so, one can observe the creep of creationism or "intelligent design" into public school curricula, as well as the downgrading of evolution to the point that some teachers might include disclaimers that "it's just a theory" and leaving it at that.

As for our friend Thomas...well, it looks like he's no longer welcome!

Christians in this country, however, have been successfully persuaded to believe that a vaguely-defined "secular state" is waging war on their faith, by not allowing Christian teachings and prayers to be propagated, among other places, in public schools. And somehow, in all kinds of public places -- including schools -- it's okay to pooh-pooh actual science as "just a theory." Let me tell you that, as a person of faith, I also have a Christian duty

to respect the hard work of others -- particularly those biologists, chemists, physicists, and astronomers who, after centuries of rigorously applying the scientific method, have come to conclusions that are not in harmony with a pre-scientific book of faith.

And from the more recent Covid-19 crisis, one can see that, if war is being waged against anything in this country, it is not faith, but science. Some of you may be surprised to find out that your priest has a problem with that...

It's all rather troubling because, while faith calls us to move forward, this is causing us to slide backward -- to about the 1920s, back when a certain Tennessee science teacher named John Scopes was brought to trial for teaching evolution. It turns out that teaching evolution was illegal in Tennessee at the time. As I look to more recent developments in our country, I simply can't imagine a science curriculum that forbids actual science and promotes pseudo-science; I would dread the day when another John Scopes was fighting yet again for his right to teach science in a supposedly non-religious public school!

What I'd like to convey to you this morning are two basic ideas -- one is that faith says "I believe" and the other is that science says "Show me the evidence"...and that these two basic ideas can coexist. The Thomas of today's Gospel is actually the paradigm for this coexistence; he says both "show me the evidence" in verse 25 and "I believe" in verse 28. Note, too, that his supposed "doubt" incurs no particular wrath or penalty; it's not like his

initial skepticism damns him to a sure and certain punishment! It's a harmless, human inclination to say, "Show me the evidence." In fact, "Show me the evidence" and "I believe" compliment each other and keep us in balance. "I believe" without "show me the evidence" can lead to fanaticism and absolutism, while "show me the evidence" without "I believe" can lead to restlessness and unbelief.

And the good news is that Christians don't have to live in a rigid box that insists on a "science" based on a book of faith. God gave us this great universe for us to ponder and unlock...not to stuff into his book! There's a point at which science can become the round peg and the Bible can be the square hole we're trying to pound science into -- and let us try to avoid that. Let us, instead, apply Thomas's skepticism to the things for which we need more evidence -- like the age of the Earth and the existence of fossils. And let us apply Thomas's faith to the One who was crucified and rose for us -- Jesus Christ -- and try not to sweat so many details in between.

But what do we say in the end? Did Thomas make it wrong for us to question certain things or healthy for us to question certain things? I think you know what my answer is...

Yes, he did make it healthy for us to question...to say, "Show me the evidence." In fact, it may also be responsible in addition to healthy to question. One can make someone else say and do virtually anything when one does so in the name of God and justifies it

with the Bible. But that's not what the Bible and (especially) the Christian faith are for. Yet, when Christianity concentrates too much authority on one person or one document, it shuts off the work of the Holy Spirit and insists on its own way instead of God's way. And every interpretation of the Bible is a human interpretation...and is in no way capable of containing absolute truth!

And when you look at the essence of the Christian faith -- Jesus Christ -- you might just see that all of American Christianity's zealotry and fanaticism is one big distraction from the essence. I find it so fitting that our Gospel text closes with the "purpose statement" for John's Gospel. Allow me to read it to you again: "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" (John 20:30-31).

I like both what it says and what it does not say. It does not say, "These are written so that you may understand that the Earth is only six thousand years old!" It does not say, "These are written so that you may see how God put the dinosaur bones in the ground to trick you." It does not say, "Believe blindly and never ask any questions." Yet it does say, "This book is to inspire faith in Jesus Christ." All that other stuff is just twenty-first century claptrap that has nothing to do with the good news of Jesus Christ.

And if you do believe that the Earth is only six thousand years old or that God put the dinosaur bones in the ground in order to trick mankind into believing in science, ask yourself, "Why?" Is it because you feel as if your faith requires you to so believe? Might I offer you this liberating thought -- it doesn't. People of faith -- going all the way back to Thomas and then a lot more centuries before that -- have asked questions and come to conclusions that challenge their faith. But a lot of them never lost their faith. And -- guess what -- they're a lot healthier than all the so-called Christians who believe blindly and fly the American flag upside down. God hopefully gave us all level heads with which to grapple both with his Word and with the mysteries of the universe. God gave us the option of saying both "I believe" and "show me the evidence." And in so doing, God also nudges us away from the irrational, the absurd, and the ridiculous.

For some reason, I think Thomas had a pretty good head on his shoulders. I hope we do, too.

Amen.