

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday of Easter
April 16, 2023

Lectionary Year A: John 20:19-31

The Thomas of today's Gospel text has been subject to a lot of criticism over the centuries because of his alleged lack of faith. So we find his name appearing from time to time in the popular vocabulary, as in "Doubting Thomas." This, then, may be applied to anyone who doesn't blindly accept the claims, dogmas, or teachings that are espoused by people or by sacred texts.

Where all of this goes is to the conclusion that doubt is always unhealthy. Certainly, we find such assumptions made in some religious institutions, where faith, apparently, puts people in a stranglehold that prohibits any questioning or challenge of sacred texts, the institution's hierarchy, or both. So if the sacred text tells the faithful that, tomorrow, April 17th, they will be teleported off to the planet Leptor (and they better be ready!), then so it shall be. No discussion, no debate, and, most certainly, no questioning.

But there are times when doubt can be healthy...and so never let someone challenge you by suggesting that your faith is inferior because you don't believe everything you hear. It may not be that your faith is inferior -- you may just be using your intelligence. Bringing this home to the Christian religion, the most extreme example I can think of when it comes to faith-gone-wrong is the handling of snakes. This, so it is thought, is a demonstration of "true faith." When one who is so filled with the Holy Spirit, one can grab up poisonous creatures and suffer neither bites nor injuries from them. As open-minded as I try to be to Christianity's many and varied expressions, this pushes me awfully

close to the edge, especially considering the fact that its Scriptural basis is from a disputed portion of the Gospel of Mark.

Regardless of that, the passage to which "snake handlers" refer is Mark 16, verses 17 and 18: "And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

Among these examples of extraordinary things believers will be able to do, we actually do one of them fairly regularly (the laying on of hands for healing), but the rest -- for any number of reasons -- don't receive much attention from us. We might also gravitate toward warnings in Scripture against doing things that are just plain stupid. It would be safe to say that God doesn't appreciate it when we look to him for protection when we're deliberately doing something dangerous. When the devil tempted Jesus to throw himself off a cliff, Jesus responded, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Luke 4:12). For many, including myself, faith does not seek danger to prove itself; as a matter of fact, you are putting the Lord your God to the test whenever you handle snakes -- literally or figuratively -- and assume that your faith will offer you some sort of special protection.

It probably won't!

So there are certain cases in which it is good to doubt. Were I to have the opportunity to handle real snakes somewhere, I would decline, on grounds of both theological and safety issues. Again, it's a matter of it being healthier to doubt than to believe. Yet my doubting that there will be some kind of divine

intervention to protect me from a serpent's venom does not mean that my faith is inferior or lacking; rather, I simply think there are more appropriate ways of expressing it.

And who among mortals has the "perfect" faith anyway? Certainly, the story of Thomas in John, chapter 20 has been used in order to show what happens when a person's faith is not perfect...or not even close. So Thomas is often used as an example to the negative -- in other words, "Don't be like Thomas!" This misses the point of the story; there is actually more good news in it than there is judgment. Remember that, apart from saying "Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27), Jesus neither scolds nor punishes Thomas for his unbelief. Moreover, this is simply the way we are wired; when we are told of extraordinary things, nine times out of ten we do not believe...and that can be a good thing. Being a believer shouldn't be the same as being naive or gullible. This is where, in my opinion, the snake handlers go wrong. Having, shall we say, peculiar beliefs endangers a person's health and safety and can lead a person into cults and sects where faith takes a back seat to brainwashing and mind control.

Eric Hoffer, author of the book The True Believer, maintains that mass movements like Communism in the Soviet Union and National Socialism in Nazi Germany depended on the promise of a bright future and on the unwavering allegiance of their subjects. But in order to get the "mass" together, one must find individuals who see themselves as flawed and gather them into a collective; the collective, then, takes the place of the previous, inferior individual and promises a much better life. But the lengths to which true believers go in pursuit of the "better" can be very disturbing, as has been documented by, for example, the atrocities in Nazi Germany.

But Christianity can be a breeding ground for maniacal devotion to bizarre, violent, and dangerous things, as well. And we're not just talking about snake handling here, folks. People use the Christian faith as a justification for extremism, bigotry, and even crime; think in particular of the Christian guise that groups like the Ku Klux Klan put on! But in order to get people to go that far, you need to have true believers -- those whose allegiance to the doctrine and beliefs of the group is so unwavering and unquestioning that it doesn't matter how strange they might be.

So is it good to believe anything and everything? No. There are times when we need to filter out some of the stuff that might be dangerous, wrong, or just downright stupid! Moreover, faith must not devolve into insanity, for that would destroy our church, our relationships, and eventually, ourselves.

You can't blame Thomas for being skeptical; it's just the thing we all do, and it's often for our own good. Maybe Thomas learned that sometimes it's wrong to be a skeptic. That would be the best conclusion I could come to after looking at this text. Also, take a look at the role of Jesus himself here. Eventually, he is the one chiefly responsible for Thomas's conversion from doubt to faith. When Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), he is a doubter no more. Those are the words of a person of faith, and yet another example of the transformative power of the presence of Christ.

But what about all of us who can't share in this great opportunity of seeing Jesus face-to-face. Well, Jesus makes that pretty clear, too. He says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29).

Okay, now let's assume that every one of us fits into this category. We are the

people who believe in spite of not having had the opportunity to see Jesus face-to-face. Even among this esteemed group, there are bound to be a few -- maybe some -- who have doubted, questioned, or challenged something in the Bible, in the church, or in the church's teachings. Maybe this doubting, questioning, and challenging is happening right now. After all, you might not be sure what this character at the lectern is up to!

Well, I can assure you that much of the time, doubting, questioning, and challenging doesn't destroy faith. In fact, it makes it stronger. If nothing has ever confounded or confused you or if nothing has ever left you with a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty, then you probably haven't given anything very much thought! But then you also might be one of those who thinks, wrestles, and prays over the ambiguities, contradictions, and just plain confusing stuff of the Christian faith...and, guess what, you then bring a much greater richness and depth not only to yourself but to the entire community of faith. And there, you have seen that it was through the crucible of doubt, questions, and challenges that you passed into a richer and deeper faith.

People like that are just the sort of folks we want speaking of their faith, because they know both sides. I often admit that in some counseling arenas, particularly on the subject of marriage, I am quite unqualified because I've never been married. Without any firsthand experience, my advice might seem hollow, if not moralistic. It's kind of like that with faith, too. You can hear the ferventness and passion with which Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" That ferventness and passion came not from a perfect little believer, but from someone who, initially, did not believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

And lastly, "true believers" gone wrong just do bad things. Courting danger,

proclaiming hate, and justifying crime with bizarre, violent, and dangerous doctrines are hardly things Jesus would want anyone to do! But on the other hand, skeptics have the conscience and thoughtfulness to steer clear of such insanity. Like Thomas, they have the faith to keep grappling with things much more profound than that which can be seen with the naked eye. Yes, doubt can be healthy, especially when lives are at stake. And yet we have the One who can reveal himself to us -- much as he did to Thomas -- and bring us to that richer and deeper faith, because he knows that we desire only to be closer to him.

Amen.