

Easter 02 B 2018
April 8, 2018 :: John 20:19-31
Fr. Jim Cook

“Being Reconciled to One Another.”

Every year, on the first Sunday after Easter, we get to hear the gospel reading that describes Thomas’ encounter with the Risen Jesus.

But what has lately fascinated me is the earlier encounter between Thomas and the other disciples, that was described in the first-half of our gospel reading. They’ve had their encounter with the Risen Jesus, but Thomas wasn’t with them. And when they try to describe for Thomas what had happened, Thomas replied (as we heard a few moments ago):

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

And what’s so fascinating to me is the fact that that’s the end of the conversation. The disciples have just made this strong,

affirmative declaration that Jesus, whom they all saw die, is now alive again, and Thomas refuses to believe it. And that's it.

This interaction reminds me of something that happened much earlier in John's gospel, in the first chapter. The ministry of Jesus has just begun, and Jesus is recruiting followers. When Jesus invites Philip to become one of his followers,

^{John 1:45} Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

So, here we have two examples of strong, affirmative declarations being made, and two examples of people doubting the truth of those declarations. And the weird part is that everyone seems to be okay with that!

I've not been able to find out who originated the term "Doubting Thomas," or even when it was coined. But nowadays,

whenever it's used, it's hardly a compliment. And that has caused me to wonder: When did doubting become a bad thing?

This happens to me a lot: Someone comes to the Episcopal Church from another denomination. And in the course of our conversations, they reveal that, back at their previous church, they weren't allowed to question any of the faith- statements that were being made; that they weren't allowed to express any doubts about what they were being taught; that it was forbidden for them to question those in authority. And if they did any of those things, they're told they're not Christians.

Well, I have a confession to make: I have my own doubts. For example, in the Rite One version (i.e., the traditional language version) of the Apostles' Creed, we make the affirmative declaration that, after Jesus died, "He descended into Hell." And whenever I have had to say those words, I think to myself, "No, he didn't," because I don't believe in Hell. And I don't believe in Hell because I believe that the existence of a place like Hell would be totally incompatible with what I believe to be the true character and nature of God. However, if you want to believe in Hell – if that belief really helps you on your spiritual journey – I won't try to

stop you, but if the opportunity ever arises I might try to dissuade you of what I believe to be bad theology.

I can remember when I was in seminary, and I took a class on the teachings of the early Church Fathers. In each class, we would study one of the teachings, and then discuss it, trying to decide if that was still something of value to us today. Most days, things were alright. But let me tell you, on the day we discussed the ancient teachings about the Virgin Birth of Jesus – Boy, howdy! – things got tense! But even then, in the end, we remained friends, even if we did disagree on certain aspects of our faith.

So, why is all this important? Well, in our Collect for the Day – which is a unique prayer near the beginning of each Sunday’s worship service, and it’s a prayer that reflects a theme that is somehow common to all the Bible readings – our Collect of the Day this morning begins like this:

“Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's

Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith...”

Well, one of the themes woven throughout the Old Testament, is the fact that God has acted in human history in an effort to reconcile all of humanity to himself. And one of the themes woven throughout the New Testament, is the fact that, in Jesus, God has accomplished the reconciliation of humanity to himself.

And here’s the thing: One of the benefits – maybe even one of the goals – of our being reconciled with God, is the fact that we can finally be reconciled with one another. And the dictionary defines reconciliation as “restoring friendly relations between” two or more parties. That, my friends, is God’s will for the world. And that is why, in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, St. Paul wrote:

^{2:13} But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and

has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

And so, what all this ultimately means is that, we who would call ourselves the followers of God, must be about the task of working for peace among all nations; working to establish “friendly relations” among all people; working, in other words, to “show forth in our lives” what we profess by our faith. And doing so, even with those – and perhaps especially with those – with whom we disagree.

Let us pray:

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.