

From John's Gospel: Jesus said to Thomas, do not doubt; only believe.

Today we celebrate the second Sunday of Easter. Many of you know that it is called *Doubting Thomas Sunday*, because we remember the gospel story from John 20 every year on the second Sunday of Easter, how he declared that he wouldn't believe until he had seen and touched the scars in Jesus' hands. I guess this is probably Thomas' least favorite Sundays of the year! I saw a cartoon that said it well. It was a picture of Thomas with the caption, "you say you won't believe something one lousy time and they never let you forget it!" Poor Thomas, the patron saint of doubt.

Today, instead of doubt, let's begin the story of Thomas somewhere different, with a carpenter's square. If you ever see an icon of Thomas, you will notice he usually has a carpenter's square in his hand. St. Peter has keys. Patrick has a shamrock. And Thomas has a carpenter's square. Doubt wasn't all of Thomas' story.

You may remember that this resurrection appearance to Thomas wasn't the first time he made his way into the

gospel story. In John's gospel, Thomas is often the one willing to ask questions, like when Jesus says they know the way that he is going, and Thomas says poignantly and honestly, "how can we know the way?" It seems to me that it was in this same vein that he said he wouldn't believe until he saw the scars, perhaps not rooted only in doubt, but because he didn't look for easy answers. In fact, a lot of what was recorded about Thomas suggests that he rarely looked for anything easy in life.

There are legends and stories from the first three centuries that didn't make their way into the Bible; they are called apocrypha. Some contains stories of Thomas. These stories are not completely accurate, which is why they didn't make their way into Scripture, but they are intriguing. One of these apocryphal books is called "The Acts of Thomas," and it tells more about his life.

The story begins that Jesus appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection, as he does in today's gospel; but unlike today's story, Jesus has them draw lots to decide where each would go. Thomas drew India, but he said he was not healthy enough and that he couldn't teach

Indians. Well this is where the legend gets interesting. It says that Jesus didn't like his answer so he sold him to a traveling merchant going back to India. Yes, you heard me right, our resurrected Lord sold Thomas to a traveling merchant. (Now you know why this story didn't make it into the bible!)

In the story, the merchant was looking for a carpenter to go back to India and build a palace for a king. That is why he purchased Thomas, because he was a carpenter. Once they got to India, the king commissioned a palace and gave Thomas twenty pieces of silver, but instead of using it to build a palace, Thomas gave it all to the poor. As you can imagine, the king was furious and wanted to kill him. But before that happened, the king's brother died and was taken to heaven. In a vision, the money that Thomas gave away bought an eternal palace for the king in heaven. The king's brother returned to earth and told the king how Thomas built him a heavenly dwelling by helping the poor. At that point, the king decided not to kill Thomas and converted to Christianity.

Now I doubt that most of this story is true. I hope Jesus

would never sell any of us for twenty pieces of silver, but I suspect it tells us something very true about Thomas. History says he did go to India to carry the gospel there. That is why he is the patron saint of India. There is also the belief that he was a carpenter and that he built churches in India. Thus he is remembered with a carpenter's square in hand. "The Acts of Thomas," in addition to some strange stories, explains why he is the patron saint of India and carpenters, as well as of the blind and of philosophers. Yet despite it all, he seems to hold on to that one title as the patron saint of doubt.

So today, I think we could also remember Thomas as the patron saint of people who think deeply and who reject easy answers. I don't know that we really hold up doubt as a virtue around here, but we do generally agree that believing anything just because you are told that you have to in order to get into heaven is a pretty lousy way to experience the resurrected life of Jesus. We believe Jesus died to take away our sin, not our minds. Asking hard questions and seeking answers worthy of our resurrected Lord are some of the most important things we do in life, and it is worth saying that Thomas

is the patron saint of that, too.

The Acts of Thomas goes on to say that, after his initial encounter with the Indian king and the twenty pieces of silver, he went on to preach the gospel and to build churches. It is interesting to me how the legend tells us that those churches, all of the work of spreading the gospel in India, was built based first on concern for the poor. His first action as an apostle and missionary was to give away everything he had out of concern for the poor. That act of generosity was the very thing whereon the church was built. Thomas loved asking hard questions and rejecting easy answers, and he balanced that with an ongoing care for others. God willing, we have that in common with him, too.

I suspect we could stop there. We like to ask hard questions, like Thomas. Our faith demands the care of the poor, like Thomas. But in some of Jesus' final words to Thomas, he said to him, "do not doubt but believe." And I suspect that we and Christians throughout the ages have heard this imperative as meaning us as well. That is no accident. You see, in those early years, proof

of the resurrection rested on having seen the risen Jesus, having eaten and drunk with him. And if you hadn't been there, at the empty tomb or in that upper room, you could ask someone who was there. But as the years went by, that phenomenon of course died with them. Instead, what developed in Christian vocabulary is the word *pistos*, belief. That is how they came to participate in the resurrection, by believing in it.

But I suspect that we do ourselves a disservice if we understand belief only to mean ascribing to a set of empirical ideas. The ancient Greek word for believe, the word that they would have used in the world of early Christianity, and even the root word for *Credo* that we say every Sunday when we affirm our faith in the Nicene Creed, well it means believe. But linguistic research has investigated how exactly they may have understood it, and the research suggests that they understood it to mean, "to give your heart." To believe in Jesus and his resurrection meant to give your heart to it. To believe in his holy gospel meant to give your heart to all of it—both the convenient and the inconvenient, the difficult and the wonderful. It didn't

mean, as I suspect it is often understood, a word that forbids doubt and questions. Quite the opposite! Any of you who have ever given your heart to any thing or person know quite well that doubt and questions are allowed in such a sacred bond.

So when I hear Jesus telling Thomas not to doubt but to believe, I hear him inviting him to give his heart to all of this—to the difficult questions of his resurrection, and to where it would send him, and how it would cause him to care for the poor and build churches. But before the fruit of that would come, he would have to give his heart to all of that.

That is what he did. Thomas wasn't just the patron saint of doubt. He became the patron saint of all who have had questions about God, yet have still found a way to give their hearts to the living presence of Christ, to the hope that his gospel brings. He is the patron saint of all who love God with all their heart and soul and mind, and who do not stop there, but love their neighbors as themselves. God willing, that is our story too.

There is a great commercial of a little boy playing baseball by himself. Three times he yells, "I am the best hitter in the world," and three times he throws up the ball into the air, and three times he swings and misses. But after the third time, clearly having struck out, he smiles. He smiles and yells even more loudly, "I'm the best pitcher in the whole world!"

I suspect it was something like that for Thomas, as he reached into the once-crucified hands. He had been the best doubter, yet in that moment became the patron saint of all who have worked through doubt in order to give their hearts to the resurrected Christ, who are not satisfied only to believe, but give their hearts to him and his gospel, to see him alive and living all around us.