



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

“Why”  
Easter 2B – April 7, 2024  
John 20:19-31

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo Popham

Many call the second Sunday of Easter, “low Sunday” because attendance is generally low, compared to Easter Day. We had 83ish in attendance last Sunday, and a gloriously joyous celebration it was. Many priests take off low Sunday, and I understand why, after 16 services last week. But I wonder why anyone would miss the opportunity to preach on today's Gospel reading.

Today we recall Christ's resurrection at the Eucharist as we do every Sunday. I have no doubt that what we do at the altar as a reenactment is a true representation of what our Lord did at his last Passover meal with his disciples. What mixed messages the disciples received that night. No doubt that meal was meaningful to his closest followers, but the shocking events that transpired after the meal must have caused them to pause and wonder what was going to happen next. I am certain that the disciples doubted – and not just Thomas.

I want to invite us all to doubt. And to doubt boldly! Disbelief and doubt are part of the Easter experience. Jesus did not condemn Thomas or his disciples and followers for doubting. Yes, we celebrate and embrace Easter with joy, and we hope for the resurrection we have been assured of by our Lord putting an end to death. We trust the promise of eternal life by Jesus been raised from the dead. But we must also doubt; we must embrace our disbelief. Easter holds life and death in one hand. And if we are honest we hold the mystery of the resurrection – the doubt or disbelief – along with the joy of our Lord's return – in a delicate balance.

Have any of us ever wondered why no one – not one of the disciples – said to our Lord “Welcome back – welcome home!” or “Jesus, you came back as promised!”? Why none of them rejoiced with an “Alleluia! Woo hoo, he did it!” None of Jesus's followers were reported to have said: “We knew it all along.” Yes, they were afraid and shocked when Jesus appeared to them. And he said what every messenger of God – (every angel) had said: “Peace be with you.” Peace? They must have thought how could they be at peace when their best friend had just been falsely accused, tried, and convicted of crimes they did not understand, and then brutally killed. There might never

be peace in their lives again. They might be hunted down and share the same fate as Jesus. How could Jesus be alive and offering them peace? I think that they were all doubters. Likely they had expressed their fears and doubts about Jesus's promises. They were huddled in fear behind locked doors in fear of the Jewish authorities. Wouldn't we have loved to have been with them? I would! I would have wanted to know why, WHY, they were hiding when Jesus had taught them to be fearless in loving everyone.

I have always wondered, could it be that Thomas was the bravest of all the disciples? He was not there when Jesus first appeared to the other disciples. Could it be that he was the only one brave enough to go out to get provisions – to get food – for his friends? When Jesus came the remaining 10 disciples were convinced that it was their teacher, their friend when he showed them his hands and side. Thomas was expected to believe without having seen. When Thomas returned the others said that they had seen the Lord, and he demanded: Show me the evidence! “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.”

The very next week when the community of Jesus's followers were still gathered in that room, Jesus appeared again. Why did Jesus come back that second time? Did he do that for us? He encouraged Thomas saying: “Do not doubt but believe.” And upon seeing, Thomas did not have to touch Jesus's marred hands or his side. No, he believed and made the first and most complete affirmation of faith of anyone in the gospel: “My Lord and my God!” Since then, the faith of all Christians –in all ages – has rested on the testimony of Thomas and the first believers. Thomas's eyewitness account and his expression of faith has helped those who were not witnesses of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension– to help us – to “come to believe” and thus “have life in Jesus's name” – eternal life. Our Lord asked: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This was not a rebuke of Thomas. It was a confirmation of Thomas's faith. Jesus spoke these words in the Gospel according to John to the community of believers who – just like us – were doubters. What a blessing that has been to all who had come to believe – and all who in the centuries since have come to believe – even though they had not had the benefit of direct experience being with Jesus after he was raised

from the dead. Yes, seeing is believing, but blessed are we who believe even though we had not seen – all the generations from John’s community all the way up to our time.

Even today there are many doubters. I pray that we are doubters too. I find it liberating that we don’t have to have all the answers to be faithful – we can have doubts and still come to church and worship God. Indeed doubting allows us to explore what we believe. If we are honest, I believe that we all are still trying to figure out what it is we believe, but together we can come to a better understanding of our faith – holding the joy and triumph of Easter in a delicate balance with our fear and our unbelief. Yes, it would be easy if Easter were only about joyful ringing of bells and “Alleluias.” And it would be easier if Easter were only about living in fear or doubt. But we are to hold these emotions together and explore why we are so joyous at the same time as being in doubt. That is why we live in community; that is why we come to church – to search for answers to our questions while we are praising God with songs of triumphs, that is why I am happy to be here on low Sunday to share my doubts along with my joy of being saved by what happened on Easter. We come here together on Sundays, and during the week – to further develop what we know and believe. We come here for spiritual food. We come to be fed with holy food and with friendship, so that we can live who we are as Christians the rest of the week. In our Psalm we said “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). While we all may not be entirely united in the exact details of our beliefs, we all have faith that we are here to find God in his son Jesus the Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. The beauty of the Episcopal Church as a member of the Anglican Communion and as part of the Jesus Movement, is that we are the *via media* – the middle way – being both Catholic and protestant and able to embrace a wide range of beliefs. We can agree to disagree on points of the customs of St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea and even some of the traditions of the Episcopal Church, but we hold onto the unchangeable doctrines of the larger church. And we strengthen our individual faith by coming together for worship. My brothers and sisters, even when we doubt, we are blessed by our faith, not in small part, because of what also happened in that room where the disciples were secreted away. In the Gospel according to John we have the coming of the Holy Spirit. This was Pentecost to early Christians. There was no need to wait the great 50 days of Easter as we do according to our traditions of the church that developed

much later. No, when Jesus came to his own that day, he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” And they did. And I am certain that Jesus breathed on Thomas too, because he believed without having to touch the Lord’s hands and side as he declared: “My Lord and my God.” Why? Because Thomas had received the Holy Spirit and could believe and profess the truth of who Jesus was and is. We too have the Holy Spirit to lead us to all truth.

I am told since I could understand that my first word was not Mama or Dadda, but WHY. I still need to know why. Why was church always an integral part of my life? I think because I found the need to know why God would do this or that at every crossroad in my life and all the small throughfares in between. Why? Why this road or that one? Why were most of the women in the Bible stories in supportive roles? Why was Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, marked as a tainted woman by the church in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and still today by many? Why did so many of the women in the stories not have names? Why could boys be acolytes and not me? Why were only adult males allowed to be lay readers? Why? Why were females allowed to be Sunday school teachers but not able to train young people for confirmation? Why were my options limited only to being a nun if I wanted to serve God as my vocation? Why? I asked. And I asked a lot. So my priests let me read the lessons in church as early the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and let me write and lead the Sunday school service and do children’s sermons? Why? And now almost 50 years since women have been ordained priests in the Episcopal Church, why have I been the first woman priest at every church where I have been honored to serve? Why? Do we really think I am the only girl, only woman to doubt? To ask why? Jesus died for me as well as all of us. He died to save all people, male and female, rich and poor, gay or straight, educated or not, happy or sad, and so on, and so on. I have never doubted the saving grace of our Lord Jesus, never doubted this my whole life, but I have doubted the actions of the church and many believers for all these decades. But I will always affirm everyone’s right and everyone’s need to doubt and ask why.

I am glad I got to preach on Thomas this low Sunday. I hope you are.

So as we leave today as resurrection people let us take the risen Christ with us, and may we bear our doubts lightly as we share our love and faith in the Lord with others.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

