

**Christ Church
Montpelier, Vermont
Sermon, Year B, 3rd Sunday of Easter, 15 April 2018¹
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Doubt & What am I Called to Now?

In the Name and praise of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning.

Today's Gospel and last Sunday's Gospel both involve a post-Resurrection appearance by Jesus to the disciples, with Doubt being an element in common. Last week's Gospel included the story of doubting Thomas: the Apostle who would not accept the report of other Apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead and appeared to them, with the holes in his hands and side from the Crucifixion; Thomas, who said that he would not believe unless he could put his finger and hand in the wounds; then Jesus appeared again, this time when Thomas was present -- *then* Thomas believed, and Jesus said: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen *and yet have come to believe.*"²

Today's gospel tells of a later appearance by Jesus to disciples, which was after a separate appearance by Jesus to some disciples along the road to Emmaus and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread together.³

When Jesus appears in their midst and says, "Peace be with you," the disciples "were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost." Jesus responded: "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I

¹ Acts 3:12-19 (God raised Jesus from the dead – "to this we are witnesses");
Ps. 4 ("how long will you worship dumb idols and run after false gods?");
First letter of John: 3:1-7; Gospel Luke 24:36b-48.

² John, 20:19-31.

³ See, Luke, 24:13-35.

myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones.” Further demonstrating that he wasn’t a ghost, he asked them for something to eat, and ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence. Jesus opened their minds to the Scriptures. Jesus said to them: “You are *witnesses* to these things.”

OK, it is easy enough to question whether Jesus rose from the dead and appeared multiple times in flesh and blood. After all, I’ve never seen such a thing. Once the person goes into the ground or into ashes, they’re gone. Yeah, maybe there’s a story or two in the Bible that Jesus raised Lazarus, somebody else from the dead, but that could have been faked news, maybe an actor pretending.

People often speak in words grounded in faith and hope in connection with the belief that Easter was real, that Jesus rose from the dead as he said he would. That is fitting, that belief is central to our faith. But recall that the threefold sources of authority in Anglicanism are Scripture, reason and tradition, with the analogy of a three-legged stool, that each source works in balance with the others. According to the Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, reason includes the discernment of truth both by logic and intuitive ways.

Many of you know, I’m a lawyer. I respect facts and reason. I’m not going to make this sermon into a legal brief, but from my perspective there is substantial credible evidence that Jesus wasn’t just a good person and teacher who died and that was the end of him. It’s not as if there were only one or two *witnesses* or only one or two appearances after Jesus was killed on the cross. The Gospels of John and Luke especially contain accounts of multiple appearances, to the Apostles and other disciples, in the upper room, along the road to Emmaus and then Jesus being recognized in the

breaking of bread,⁴ today's Gospel, and by the sea of Galilee, where Jesus again ate fish disciples had cooked over a fire.⁵

What about the reported miracles? Were they hoaxes? Lazarus had been wrapped in burial linens and entombed for four days when Jesus brought him back to life.⁶ Many had seen a dead girl amidst her grieving parents; Jesus said, "Arise," she did, her parents and others were amazed.⁷

There are so many other miraculous stories recounted in the Bible involving Jesus, such as people who were known to have been blind who regained their vision, lepers who were cured, and the lame who could walk again. Sure, someone could pretend they couldn't walk and then did – but pretend for years? Pretend they were lepers and then their skin was healed? Pretend they were blind for years? And it's not as if the described cures only happened in the presence of supporters of Jesus: for instance, the Pharisees were "filled with fury" when they saw Jesus cure a man's withered hand on the Sabbath.⁸

Or maybe the New Testament was an intricate conspiracy hatched by the Gospel writers and Paul, carried out over many years. But how does that fit with Paul having *persecuted* Christians until his conversion experience? What are we do with the fact that the life of Jesus fits so well with prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures written over *centuries*? Where is the *evidence* that Jesus was a phony and all the supposed miracles were faked?

And if all these accounts written in the Gospels, in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles were just a big conspiracy, what was their motive? Surely not to get rich? So they would be powerful? But it was known to the Apostles and disciples that the road they chose to follow had a good chance

⁴ See, e.g., Luke 24: 13-35.

⁵ See, e.g., Luke 24: 36-43.

⁶ John 11:1-40.

⁷ Mark 5:35-43.

⁸ Luke 6:6-11.

of leading to a violent death, as it had for John the Baptist, and indeed as it did for most of the Apostles. Maybe they were intoxicated with excitement, even knowing it was a big hoax? If so, why not renounce Jesus when one or more of them was arrested, and thereby escape being executed? *Why die for a hoax?* Yet, to my knowledge, there is no evidence of any of that.

I want to emphasize that none of what I've said is meant in disrespect to other faith traditions that see a different path, or to those who do not identify with any faith tradition. There are many fine people who look at the actions of professed Christians and justifiably say, "If your way of living is Christianity, it's not for me." Or they have seen too much in misuse of religion for terrible purpose, abuses and hypocrisy. Instead they go about their lives with respect for others, with love, and trying to do their bit to make this a better world. God bless them all.

There was another part in the "doubting Thomas" Gospel that I had overlooked for years, where Jesus said: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." After God's gift of the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, that's just what they did, these *witnesses* went forth. In my heart and mind, that is what happened.

The words, "As the Father has sent me, I send you," of course weren't just meant for those Apostles. The mission, the faith, the Spirit, the love, the witnessing has been passed down through the generations. Each of us may discern and decide what our call and role should be, and that is likely to evolve over time. That, in my experience, is not an exercise of logic. It is what we come to through our experiences, including with others, through grace. Not because we "figured it out," but with the grace and light of an opened heart.

In closing I want to recognize and honor that April 4th was the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King. He wasn't born with his "I have a Dream" message of vision, hope, faith and love -- he came to it by experience and grace. He wasn't born having been to the mountaintop, he came to it.

Two days after Martin Luther King gave his *I have been to the Mountaintop* speech he was murdered. That night, Senator Robert Kennedy was scheduled to make an open-air campaign stop and speech in Indianapolis, when the news came that Martin Luther King had been killed.⁹ The local police chief advised Kennedy to skip the campaign stop, which was in the poor section of that city, including a lot of black people, too dangerous. He went anyway. He stood up on a truck bed and announced the terrible news to the shocked crowd. He never looked at the notes in his hand – you can see this on the Internet. Robert Kennedy then said:

My favorite poem, my favorite poet was Aeschylus, who wrote:

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget

Falls drop by drop upon the heart,

Until, in our own despair,

Against our will,

Comes wisdom

Through the awful grace of God.

Then he said:

“What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United states is not violence and lawlessness, But is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country,

⁹ Senator Robert Kennedy was seeking the Democratic nomination for the 1968 Presidential election.

whether they be white, or they be black.”

Senator Robert Kennedy, born into wealth and white privilege, was not born with that speech in his heart either. He came to it.

Likewise, a question of discernment for each of us: What am I called to now?

What am I called to now?

Amen.

Steve/ Ministry/SermonYrB15APR18 (Doubt&What am I called to Now)