

Year C*Easter 2*2010*Obey God Not Men
Rick Lawler

Thomas is called the doubter but he is by no means the only one.

Almost every account of Jesus' resurrection contains within it some expression of doubt or unbelief.

From the gospel of Matthew:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹

From Luke:

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" ²

The Gospel of Mark almost has a litany of doubters and a Jesus who is fed up with it. Here's Mark;

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. ¹⁰ She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. ¹¹ But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. ¹³ And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

¹⁴ Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. ³

It seems very honest of the Gospel writers and the Christian tradition to include such stories of doubting disciples. These are men and women who were there, some who experience appearances of the Risen Lord and still do not believe.

It makes room for those of us who have doubts,
who struggle to believe.

The Church seems to be saying that there is room for doubt and doubters in the Church right from the get go. Which is very good news for some of us.

¹*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 28:16-17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

²*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 24:36-38). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 16:9-14). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

I think, over the years I have spoken clearly to this and I hope you know I have doubts, you have doubts, and all God's children have some doubts. But once we have allowed a place for doubting disciples in the canon, in the church, and in ourselves, we must not stop there.

There are limitations which doubt places on us that can, and for me must, be transcended by the choice to believe,
to trust the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection, the Church sees, requires belief.

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."⁴

Now remember belief means to hold to your heart. I hold the resurrection to my heart now.

I don't know exactly what happened.

I don't know if the biblical accounts of the resurrection are accurate eyewitness statements.

I don't know that later faith, pious exaggeration, or plain old hope, didn't color people's memories and writing.

But I hold the Resurrection of Jesus to my heart.

I hold the third day to my heart.

I hold his appearing to Mary, and Peter, the eleven, Thomas, and much later to Paul to my heart.

Believing opens avenues of Holy Energy.

And that's what I need.

Let's go to Peter now, in the Acts of the Apostles.

But remember the terrible sequence of events Peter has just lived through.

Jesus' arrest.

Peter's denial.

The crucifixion followed by fear and hiding.

Then the weird crazy tales of some of the women, at least from Peter's perspective.

⁴*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 20:27-29). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

(It must be said that these so-called “tales” experienced, interpreted by belief then communicated is what the risen Jesus wants the men to do, which they resist. The women seem more able and ready for faith.

Then, according to Luke and Paul, Jesus appears privately to Peter. No one tells us what happens in that private meeting. We can only imagine.

Then comes the real change in Peter.

He finally gets is.

He is forgiven and he is empowered. So much so that about two months after he is cowering in fear of the same people, Roman or Jewish, who assassinated Jesus he is standing up in public, in the Temple, proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus and forgiveness of sins in his name.

Now it’s Peter who is arrested.

Imprisoned.

Mysteriously liberated.

And instead of going into hiding he marches back to the temple to preach.

That’s where we pick up the story.

When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²² But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, ²³ “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” ²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. ²⁵ Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” ²⁶ Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” ⁵

“We must obey God rather than men.” This is a scripture worthy of memorization, Acts 5.29.

I am so impressed with Peter here.

He risks imprisonment, death, and who knows what else to obey God rather than human authority. . . why? . . . because Jesus is raised from the dead. The power of the resurrection is in his heart and mind and decisions and values.

⁵*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 5:21-29). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

He can stand up to Rome.
He can stand up to the Temple.
He can stand up to anybody.
He's got the power!
The power to do what is right and keep on doing what is right.

And that's why we need to believe in the resurrection.

We need the power.

We've got work to do.
Sins must be forgiven.
Oppressed people must be liberated.
Governments must be stood up to.
Religious hierarchies must be called to account.

This takes power and that's what the resurrection is, OUR SOURCE OF HOLY POWER,
GOD POWER,
JESUS POWER.

It is hard work we've been given to do,
feed the hungry,
clothe the naked,
visit the lonely,
release the captives.
It's hard work that meets with frustration at every turn.
We are in constant danger of the being overcome with despair, depression, fear,
cynicism.

We need to be connected to the never-ending-
forever-fountain-flowing-
water-over-the-banks-abundant-
hopeless-cause-rescuing-
divine power.

Ours is the hardest work in the world;
believing in the face of a paralyzing cynicism.
hoping things can change when all around us seems to going to hell in a hand basket.
trusting God when we can never even know if there is a God.
loving when making ourselves vulnerable seems like madness.

WE'VE GOT TO STAY CONNECTED!
And the resurrection is our connection to divine power.

I repeat, our work is the hardest work in the world;
whether we are struggling to feed the hungry,

or dig our way out of addiction,
or raise our children to believe they are loved and worthwhile,
or make peace in a violence obsessed world,
mourn the loss of one we love,
we need power,
holy power.

As Christians the Resurrection of Jesus is precisely how and where the power flows through our spiritual lives. And believing in the resurrection is the way we connect, holding the resurrection dear, to the heart.

God of glory, fill your Church with the power that flows from Christ's resurrection,
that, in the midst of this sinful world, we may signal the beginning of a renewed
humanity, raised to new life with Christ;
who lives,
and reigns,
with you
and the Holy spirit,
one God,
for ever
and ever.
Amen.