

Yr. B, Easter 2
April 28, 2019
A Sermon by Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1556 Words

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 118:14-29
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

After 40 days of Lent, we arrived here last week all dressed up and excited to celebrate Easter! We joined our voices to praise God for the miracle of Christ's resurrection, we proclaimed alleluias with Mary Magdalene, St. Peter, and the beloved disciple who ran to the tomb to discover that Christ is risen!

One week later, St. Thomas enters the room, and says, "Wait a minute. I am not so sure about all this." Thomas should be the patron saint of Missouri—the "show me" state. Let's face it; Thomas could be *our* patron saint too. There's a lot of merit in the old adage, "seeing is believing." Most of us subscribe to the mindset that, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." And we know that for Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John—at least initially—Jesus being raised from the dead *was* too good to be true!

So, Thomas was really not that different from the others, except that he showed up late. I believe the English translation of this morning's Gospel is a little too timid and polite when it quotes Thomas as saying, "Unless I...*put* my finger in the mark of the nails and *put* my hand in his side, I will not believe."¹ The Greek verb is 'βαλω,' which means to *throw* or *thrust* with force. It is the word from which we get our English adjective, 'ballistic.' So, Thomas has made a passionate demand about just what it will take for him to get on board. "Unless I *thrust* my hand in his side, I will not believe!"

What good news in *your life* or in the life of this faith community would seem to be too good to be true? I want you to think about this, and *keep thinking about it* until you come up with something. What resurrection reality—what 'new life reality' would seem just too good to be true? What *idea*, what kind of *ministry* performed in Christ's name, what *next step* in our common life as a congregation would seem so bold as to churn up significant doubts in your mind as to whether it is *reasonable or not*?

If you cannot think of something that would stir up your doubts, keep trying. If you can't think of something that would cause you to react like Jesus' original disciples—with doubts and fears—then maybe your faith is too safe, or too small, or too comfortable.

You know, the apostles could have said to Thomas, "Hey, we found a personal good bye letter from Jesus." And Thomas would have said, "Oh, well that's nice." But the Good News of Easter was not a small, sweet gesture of kindness. The Good News of Easter is the most outrageous and impossible-sounding news there is, "Alleluia! *Christ is risen!*"

The *same body* of Christ that was hanging limp on a Roman cross...the *same body* of Christ that was pierced with a spear...the *same body* of Christ that was buried in a donated tomb—*that body of Christ* is gloriously risen!

Now you all should know what the Church is, according to our catechism. The Church is the Body of Christ in this world today. Wounded? Yes. Scarred? Yes. But very much alive! And practicing healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation in God's name.

¹ John 20:25

I'm going to skip over about two thousand years of outrageous and miraculous stories of resurrection and new life blossoming in the Church—the kind of stories you and I would *reasonably doubt* as too good to be true. And I'm going to focus instead on the last 50 years in this congregation.

The risk of using some examples and not others is that I may leave out the most important ones. The good news is that we have a wall in the Christian education wing dedicated to receiving your pictures and stories from the last 50 years, and so you can update the record!

When a group of people sat down with the bishop to launch a new parish on the east side of Greenville, there were good reasons to doubt the boldness of their idea. Christ Church was just not that far away, and neither were other places to worship. Founding a new mission is *not* for the faint of heart, and I suspect there were some who doubted and remained where they were comfortable. But—thank God—*some people* acted like St. Thomas. They thrust their hands and their hearts into *this mission*. And the Body of Christ took on new life in this community.

When the leaders of this congregation said, “It’s time for St. Peter’s to be racially integrated.” There were good reasons to doubt the boldness of that idea. Even if folks privately thought that racial integration was *the right thing to do* at some point, what about others who might get upset and leave? What about pledges? Thank God—some people acted like St. Thomas. They thrust their hands and their hearts into this righteous development. And the Body of Christ took on more new life in this community.

When leaders in this congregation said, “We can become *more generous* and we can *perform more service and outreach* in Jesus’ name.” There were good reasons to doubt the boldness of their idea. After all, operating funds were very tight and we might scare people off if we ask them to serve those in need. Thank God—some people acted like St. Thomas. They thrust their hands and their hearts into seeking and serving Christ out in the world, because they knew that people will *only know* we are Jesus’ disciples by our love. St. Peter’s *passionate* commitment to service and outreach became even stronger, and the Body of Christ took on more new life in this community.

When leaders in this congregation said, “We need to build a much larger worship space and new office space.” There were good reasons to doubt the boldness of their idea. After all, St. Peter’s could have modestly expanded the original worship space by extending what *we know* as Stockstill Hall just a little further. They could have avoided the risk and expense of a big capital expansion. Thank God—some people acted like St. Thomas. They thrust their hands and their hearts into building something bold and beautiful for the glory of God and for the benefit of the next generations of people—like you and me—who might choose to worship here. And the Body of Christ took on more new life in this community.

When leaders in this congregation said, “We need to set up a permanent endowment which will perpetually fund missional, educational, and facilities opportunities that exceed what can be covered through regular operating funds.” There were good reasons to doubt the boldness of their idea. After all, the endowment trustees or the vestry might not manage the money effectively...or use it for the best opportunities. Thank God—some people acted like St. Thomas. They thrust their hands and their hearts into the idea of offering a way for people to leave a legacy of perpetual generosity in Jesus’ name through this parish’s mission. In just the last five years, St. Peter’s Family Endowment has been fortified with \$109,000 *new dollars* which can fund more than \$4000/year in sustainable grants...forever. And the Body of Christ is taking on *more new life* in this community.

Every year we have to say good bye to a few faithful pioneers who have thrust their hands and their hearts into the mission and ministry of Christ at St. Peter's. No doubt, they were all people who *had their doubts*, but did not use those doubts as excuses. Their faith, their hope, and their love were bigger than that! You and I have inherited their legacy of doubts about things that were "too good to be true". We can thank God for these saints who confronted *their doubts* so that the Body of Christ could take on *more new life* in this community.

You know, there is no reason to doubt that St. Peter's can *get by* as a parish...and do *reasonable things* like have average worship on Sunday morning, or an average Sunday school program, do a little bit of outreach, and visit a few people in the hospital—*reasonable things* like that. After all, we have a faithful, capable team of volunteers and staff. And we have a campus and a budget. There is no *reason* to doubt that St. Peter's can "get by."

But *your job* this week is to imagine the things that you might do and that we might do together in Christ's name that seem *too good to be true*—the kinds of things that raise the doubts of *reasonable people* like St. Thomas, and you and me. You see, if you don't have doubts about the future of *new life* here at St. Peter's, then your expectations are too low. If you don't have doubts, then *your* Easter proclamation may be too small...or too safe or too comfortable.

We are a people who have been blessed to hear, see, and even touch² the reality of new life through the Body of Christ in *this community*.

And now, it is *our time* to thrust our hands and our hearts into our doubts and fears, because Christ *is* risen. The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

² These verbs are purposefully drawn from 1 John 1:1