

“Pushing the Envelope”

Sermon on Sunday, April 11, 2021 (John 20: 19-31)

Dear church,

Thomas was pushing the envelope in the days after the Resurrection. He decided he was not going along with this picture perfect narrative advanced by all of his friends. The way they talked about Jesus being alive made him suspicious: an empty burial place, a man whom some described as an angel; appearances of the risen Christ all over the place, each with a different description... All of that sounded too good to be true to this disciple. And we all know the old adage that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true. If someone, out of the blue, sends you a text message on your cell phone suggesting that you won a big prize at Amazon or Walmart, it's probably a scam, a way to get access to your data. That's the world we live in. Beware of scams, be very, very careful!

So, as people who are getting used to using a “BS” detector every day, we can relate to Thomas' skepticism in the wake of Easter. What's more, we know of our own capacity to deceive ourselves. It happens. In order to believe or justify something that's important to us, we will often make all kinds of rational adjustments and stretch our arguments quite a bit. Nobody is entirely exempt from that, certainly not ordinary people. But even the most rational, scientific people with PHD's may fall victim to the same bias. It happens. In some cases, they will set up experiments in such a way that it will almost certainly prove their preconceived point, but not necessarily lead to the truth. Well, Thomas pushed for the truth. He wanted to know “IT”. This disciple, nicknamed Didymus, wanted to get to the bottom of it. I wonder whether, as a twin brother, he had learned to separate himself from his twin sibling the hard way, carving out his own identity against competition, making him just a bit bolder than most people. But I will stop psychoanalyzing here...

I imagine Thomas thought he was doing a service to God and to his community by asking questions nobody dared to ask amid all the excitement. Questions like: was the person you saw really Jesus? Then he should have significant scars on his hands and feet. Or the simpler version of the same question: what you saw, was that perhaps a ghost, an illusion? Didn't you say the door was locked when he came in? Thomas didn't know about the brain science behind such hallucinations, which can feel very real to those who experience them, but he simply knew that it is possible that the mind plays tricks on you. And he says, “Unless I touch him and put my hands in his wounds, I can't believe this!”

The approach Thomas took is not surprising to us. In fact, I know a lot of people who say Thomas is their favorite disciple precisely because he pushes the envelope. He may as well be the patron saint of the scientific age, an era when people are looking for proof and evidence all the time. What may be more surprising to people in our century is the fact that there was only one Thomas among twelve disciples. Of course that's because he wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time. Not sharing the same experience gave him a disadvantage or maybe it was an advantage... He kept a more objective view of things and could not be accused of getting caught up in the emotional mush of the moment.

The way this gospel story ends is very interesting and inspiring to me. Here is why... In the end, this story has a double message. The first part of it tells us implicitly that, if we seek the truth, if value what's real, in religion or in any other aspect of life, our tough questions will likely lead us to clearer and better answers. When Thomas finally encounters Jesus and is given "proof" he comes up with a most beautiful proclamation, "My Lord and my God." He would have never gotten there had he not pushed the envelope. On the other hand, Jesus is very clear that faith is not based on proof or what we perceive with our senses. He tells Thomas at the end of this passage, *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* Our Lord emphasizes something the mystics of all time emphasized consistently: you will see more when you close your eyes. And we all know the quote from Helen Keller who was born blind: "The best and most beautiful things in the world," she says, "cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart."

We have often, too often, made the assumption that religion is about things we don't see and science is about things we can see and proof. And that's wrong. Religion is also about things we can see and touch and hear, such as a beautiful sunrise or Thomas touching the very real body of the risen Christ and his wounds. If you go deeper in faith and religion, however, you will come across things and concepts that can't be seen, only felt, but they are without a doubt real. The same is actually true for science. The deeper discoveries of science are invisible to the naked eye. But that's for another day. For today, contemplate Helen Keller's word: "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart."

Amen.