

Acts 5:27-32  
Psalm 118:14-29 or 150

Revelation 1:4-8  
John 20:19-31

Remember Maxwell Smart? Played by Don Adams, Smart was a spy at the height of the Cold War working for a CIA clone organization called Control to defeat the powers of evil as embodied in the sinister organization KAOS. He was a bumbling sort of an agent. He was given to exaggeration. Many of his descriptions were unbelievable. He continually had to revise his reports until his statements were believable. For example, "You better drop that gun because this yacht happens to be surrounded by the Seventh Fleet .... Would you believe the Sixth Fleet? ... How about a school of angry flounder?" Or, "As soon as you're gone, by the use of sheer brute strength I shall be able to rip these chains from the wall in one minute. Two minutes? How about a week from Tuesday?"

Would you believe is the theme of our gospel lesson this week. When the disciples came to Thomas with the fantastic news of a risen Savior, they asked him, "Would you believe ... that Jesus is risen? Would you believe ... that Jesus who was crucified between two thieves is alive? Would you believe ... that he has appeared to Mary and to all of us?" Thomas' response is an emphatic, "No, I would not believe such an idle tale."

Ever since then Thomas has been given the unfair moniker "Doubting Thomas." Yes, Thomas demanded proof, seeing and touching the risen Lord. But consider, the disciples who informed him that they had seen the risen Lord had the advantage of actually witnessing the risen Lord after the crucifixion. Practically everyone in John 20 sees the resurrected Jesus. More than likely they would have doubted just as Thomas doubted and just as we would doubt if we were in their place. So why are we so hard on

Thomas for demanding the same opportunity to see Jesus that everyone else had? This leads to a more interesting question, which is, ‘Why has the Christian community developed such a negative attitude toward doubt.’” Why is doubt seen as the opposite of faith, the antithesis of faith? There are those who deem that doubt is an indication of a lack of faith. Christians may be weary of admitting they have doubt for fear of what others would think of them, for fear that if they admitted their doubt, others would think they lack faith, or were not “Christian enough,” whatever that means! Consider Jesus’ reaction to Thomas’ “doubt.”

When Thomas saw Jesus, and came to believe that Jesus was alive, believed that Jesus was resurrected, Jesus responded, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus question to Thomas does not deny the importance of seeing for the belief of the first disciples. The witness of these disciples is important to the Gospel—they have seen these events, and through them others will come to believe. However, Jesus words point forward to the later witnesses who will believe without having been present for these events. Up until this story, faith came in the face of Jesus’ physical presence. Here, in the words to Thomas, the Jesus of this Gospel sets up theologically for the experience of God not based solely on sight. Decades after these words were written, the last disciple died. Never again on earth would physical eyes certify Jesus’ presence. The blessing reassures future generations—reassures you and me—that having seen the incarnate Jesus is not a prerequisite for faith. The proclamation of the good news of Jesus, by these people who saw the risen Lord, can be the ground of faith. Yes, as they

say, seeing is believing, but here Jesus reassures us that believing is seeing. These were words of assurance from Jesus are for us two thousand years later.

God's most faithful servants have also been among the most doubtful. Abraham was incredulous and Sarah hysterical with doubt when God promised them a son in their old age. Jonah's faith was so doubt-infested that he tried to run away from his mission to Nineveh completely. Jesus' disciples were constantly doubting. Despite the fact that they were witnesses to the remarkable powers Jesus commanded, they still panicked and screamed at him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? " when Jesus was peacefully napping through a storm at sea. Luke records that after the resurrection these same disciples "disbelieved for joy and wonder". Jesus himself, the incarnation of faithfulness, cried out on the cross in doubt, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of faith.

Doubt is only natural for us living in our modern, scientific age "for empirical evidence" is valued. Empirical verification is a way of gaining knowledge by means of direct and indirect observation or experience. The rules by which the scientific community lives by dictate that in order to know something to be true, in order to prove something, it has to be experienced. We trust our sense experience. The word "empirical" means "experience." We rely on observation and experiment. For something to be real, it must be verified by observation or experiment. Empirical is good. Empirical evidence, observation, and experiment has led to our modern medical advances. I'm grateful for it. The ability to anesthetize a patient, stop the heart, put a body on a heart-bypass machine, repair a heart, and restart the heart is the only reason I am alive today. Believe me, I am grateful for empirical verification. We should not see science as the

enemy or opposite of faith! As Presbyterians, we do not believe you have to check your brains at the door before you enter the sanctuary. Christians are not to be trained to be gullible, regarded as suckers, blinded in naiveté.

We should not suppress honest doubts. Thomas voiced his serious doubts about Jesus' miraculous return. But he continued to remain in the midst of the company of the disciples. When Jesus healed the demon-possessed child in Mark 9:24, the overjoyed father exclaimed, "I believe, help my unbelief." Faith lives hand in hand with doubt by continuing to worship God, by continuing to pray to God, by participating in a community of faith.

Immanuel Kant warned that doubt is a place of rest, not a place of residence. Doubt calls us to action, not just to agitation. There is a difference between doubting and disenchantment, between wrestling with faith and flinging faith to the winds. Frederick Buechner calls doubts "ants in the pants of faith." These are the itches and twitches that keep our faith awake and moving. It is doubt that challenges our faith and prods us to grow in our faith by struggling with our faith. In the summer of 1975, I worked for a wheat farmer in south central Kansas, in Harper County. I drove a John Deere tractor all summer plowing his wheat fields. One day, I drove back to the home place, parked the tractor, and went back to work on the plow. I didn't realize that I sat right on an ant hill. Believe me, it didn't take me long to move. Those things bit hard and their stings hurt! I was motivated to move and to move quickly. Doubts are those ants. They motivate us to struggle, they don't allow us to rest on our laurels.

Don't let your doubts plug up the channels to the Almighty. Let doubts open the channels in new and fresh directions as they have never been opened before. Pray to

God, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Do like Thomas. In the midst of doubt, reach out and touch somebody's hand, and be amazed at the presence of God you find in that palm.

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might be to our God  
forever and ever. Amen.