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St. John's Episcopal Church
Easter 2

Dubito ergo Credo
(When Doubt Leads to Faith)

The tragic history of anti-Jewish polemic of the last two millennia has found significant support in today's lesson from *The Acts of the Apostles* as well as the reading from John's Gospel. In today's lection from *The Book of Acts*, Peter accuses the Jewish temple leaders of killing Jesus ("whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree"). Luke, the author of *Acts*, fails to blame Rome even though Roman soldiers administered Jesus' death. No doubt such a linkage would have been seen as treasonous by Rome and therefore dangerous to Luke and his community.

In today's gospel, John also provided fuel for persecution of Jews. His phrase, "for fear of the Jews" suggests that the Jewish authorities were out to get the disciples. But it seems more likely that it was the Romans who were trying to round up Jesus' followers, whom they looked upon as insurgents. The Roman military violently suppressed any revolutionary movement that threatened Caesar's authority. It appears that Jesus and his followers constituted such a threat.

Whatever internal political purposes may have been served by the vilification of the Jews at those times, the unintended consequences of Luke's and John's accusations and innuendos have been horrific. I trust implicitly that neither of them ever imagined or intended their words to have the lasting destructive effects that they have had. Reasonable analysis should recognize that *all* scriptures, though sacred, bear the human markings of the eras in which they were written. While striving to record the story of God's relationship with humankind, they were also written to address specific human situations at specific times. It is curious that the formation and maintenance of most group identities, tribes and religious sects, depend in some way upon having a common enemy or adversary. In a much lighter way, this proclivity finds its way more or less harmlessly into sports rivalries. Who would the Red Sox be were it not for the Yankees? Etc.

Why do the designers of the Sunday lectionary include lessons with this kind of anti-Jewish, inflammatory language? What is the point? Exploring the

beauty, mystery and power for healing of Holy Scriptures, does not preclude renouncing their toxic misuse.

It is a week now since we celebrated Jesus' resurrection with great joy and beautiful worship. Perhaps some of us feel a little letdown after all the focused anticipation of the solemn events of Holy Week and the jubilation of Easter. Today is often referred to as "Low Sunday", suggesting something like the "downer" that cast members may feel at the closing of a musical or play. What was it like for the "players" who had loved Jesus with all their hearts and could not conceive of living with out him?

I want to share something with you now that happened last week. With excited anticipation, a friend of mine had been looking and listening for the return of a pair of nesting Northern Orioles. The homecoming of these somewhat elusive, beautiful birds is a rare joy. Their colors and songs are pure delight. From my observation, they do not usually come back until mid-May. Last week, still only in the first 10 days of April, my friend informed me with true Easter joy that he had seen and heard one. Though I said nothing to dampen his soaring spirits, I was skeptical about this alleged sighting. I was not, however, at all skeptical about the effect it had on him. I wanted some of this too! Maybe it really was an early bird oriole, but I could not quite believe the report of its arrival because, like Thomas, I was not there to hear or see it. Does it really make a difference? Just because I didn't see it doesn't mean it wasn't true. The Western rational mind says, "Seeing is believing". Ours is a "show me" or "prove it to me" culture. But what if it is the other way around and *believing is seeing*? What if yearning and longing somehow open our eyes? *With* faith and *because of* faith we see things that we might not otherwise apprehend.

Thomas did not see Jesus the first time he visited the disciples in the locked room on the first day of the week. Where was he? We don't know, but his absence suggests that he was not afraid like the other disciples. Perhaps he was curious or maybe he had (upper room) cabin fever...

Thomas is a representative person. The Gospel of John was written almost three generations after Jesus' death and resurrection. There were no surviving disciples or eyewitnesses to the sacred events. John is writing to and for a community of believers, who, like us, did not see Jesus before or after his death. Thomas represents them and us. Towards the end of today's gospel John's Jesus makes this clear, "Have you (Thomas) believed because you have seen

me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This blessing would include the gospel writer himself.

When Jesus first comes to the disciples the doors are locked. He greets them twice with the words, “Peace be with you.” Perhaps he sees that they are scared and seeks to reassure them with this irenic greeting. His consoling words are reminiscent of the angels whose first words to Mary, Joseph, shepherds and others are “Do not be afraid”. Jesus too brings tidings of great joy ...that he has risen. When they understand that it is the Lord they rejoice. When he commissions them to go out to forgive others the disciples may surmise that being “sent” could mean death for them as well. We cannot blame them for being afraid.

Because of his wounds the disciples know it is Jesus who walks through locked doors. He shows them the nail holes in his hands and the opening in his side. What is the relationship, if any, between the violence of his wounds and Jesus’ repeated salutation of peace, shalom? Many Christians, including Dame Julian of Norwich, have found deep healing in the wounds of Jesus. When he comes back to the room a week later, Jesus invites Thomas to put his hands and fingers in his hands and side. Thomas is overwhelmed by this powerful invitation.

What are the doors we lock to keep out others? The world? Our neighbors? Our spouses or lovers? What is it out there that scares us? You and I have doors we keep shut, huddling and hiding in the dark, things that are private, shameful, personal ...thoughts, feelings and memories that make us vulnerable. Or so we believe. In the case of Thomas and the other disciples, Jesus ignores the barriers they have put up and just walks right in, as if to say, “There is nothing to hide, nothing so bad that I will still not come to you and love you, and encourage you to open wide the doors and go out into a world that desperately needs the love and forgiveness you can provide.”

What kind of love is this that walks through locked doors?

While the Jesus of John’s gospel admonishes Thomas for his doubting, this disciple with his questions and doubts makes my heart glad. He is someone I can relate to. He will not accept hearsay. He wants to find out for himself the truth of Jesus and is bold enough to challenge tidy explanations. His doubts are a way to open the doors he has locked in his mind.

In her book, *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong clearly states that faith depends as much upon uncertainty as certainty.

When asked about her faith in a recent interview, poet and writer Louise Erdrich said that it is *because* of her doubts that she has faith. Her belief in God is dynamic not static. With a religious background that includes Catholicism and Native American spirituality, her understanding of God is continuously evolving. Her doubts, she says, keep her faith alive. Fred Buechner put it more humorously when he said that doubts are the “ants in the pants of faith”.

Science, the art of doubting the visible, and mysticism, the art of believing in things invisible, can find common ground. Will seeing lead to believing? Will believing lead to seeing? Let's see. Let's believe.

Oh, by the way, I think I saw the orange flash of an oriole this morning high up in the greening tips of a tall tree.

Can you believe that?