

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

MAY 1, 2022 ST. THOMAS SUNDAY

JOHN 20: 19-31

“DOUBTING THOMAS’ ‘GOOD UNBELIEF”

Christ is risen! El-Masih kham! Christos anesti! Christos a inwiat! Christos bockrec! There, now that we have that straight..... This is our bold proclamation---that Christ truly arose from the grave! But perhaps you have had your doubts sometimes? Maybe about the resurrection itself or about other things concerning God and our Faith....

Today’s gospel reading, John 20: 19-31, is about the most famous doubter of all time---the Holy Apostle Thomas, commonly called “Doubting Thomas”, because he doubted if Jesus really arose. Yet, in one of the hymns in last evening’s Vespers service, his doubt is called “good unbelief”. How could his unbelief have been good, or as some translations put it, “beautiful”? Let’s dig in.....

But first a true story. In the early 1800s on the frontier there was a blacksmith who was a religious sceptic. He doubted or disbelieved everything about Christianity, even the existence of God. He was an intelligent fellow and had done reading to back up his doubting---such writers as Hume and Voltaire. And he was very open with the pioneers in his area about what he thought---even aggressive, actually. He would argue with them and try to convince them to give up their traditional religious beliefs.

Local preachers would go to him and try to get him to have faith---he was an angry sort of fellow and didn’t appreciate that. He would get into arguments with them and sometimes lose his temper and hit or kick them! Seemed a hopeless case....

There was a Methodist preacher from quite a ways away who heard about this unbelieving blacksmith. He decided to go to that little village and see what he could do. On arriving he challenged the blacksmith to a public debate. The blacksmith agreed and all the pioneers in the area gathered to hear the argument. It was a tough debate---strong arguments back and forth, a high level of emotion. As it went on the blacksmith’s anger grew and grew and his language became harsher and harsher. Finally, he totally lost his temper and punched the preacher in the face. The preacher punched him back and a very tough brawl began. They both

got beaten and bloodied pretty bad, but in the end the Methodist preacher won and the blacksmith cried "uncle". The blacksmith then announced to the crowd---"I am now convinced of the errors of my ways. I now believe!" Someone in the crowd yelled out, "Why did you change your mind?". The blacksmith answered, "Because this preacher just literally beat the hell out of me! So now I believe in heaven and in God." It is said it was a genuine conversion and that he was a very strong believer for the rest of his life! (in Freedom of Thought in the Old South, Clement Eaton, Harper, 1964, pp. 13-14)

Well, that's one way to deal with doubt and unbelief! Have a preacher beat you up! But that was not how doubting Thomas dealt with his problem.....Let's look at what he did.

St. Thomas went through 8 hard days of doubt. Christ appeared to all the disciples as a group on the night of Pascha, the day of His Resurrection. For some reason that we don't know, Thomas was absent. Of course, the disciples told Thomas all about seeing the risen Christ, but he didn't believe it. He had strong doubts and wanted proof.

Have you ever been (or are now) a doubting Thomas? Probably most of us at one time or another have struggled with our own doubts. Maybe some of you never have---that's a very good thing! But there is a good chance you have---I know I have had sometimes over the years. And perhaps some of you here today are going through a doubting time even now.

There are different levels and different types of doubt.

---There are the really big doubts, such as: Is there a God? If so, is He really all-powerful? Really good? Does He really love us? Does He care about me at all? ---And then another level of doubt, about particular things in our Faith: Do miracles really happen? Is Holy Communion really the actual Body and Blood of Jesus? Is prayer real? Or St. Thomas' particular doubt---did Christ really rise from the grave? ---And then the very personal types of doubt---Why doesn't God heal me of my disease? Why did God allow my spouse or my friend to die so young? Why does God allow tragedies in the world---wars, earthquakes, famines, etc.?

Yes, lots of kinds of doubts! Most likely you have struggled with some of them. Maybe you are even right now. St. Thomas sure struggled. Think about it---by becoming one of the 12, he had devoted his entire life to Jesus Christ. 100% dedication. And then he saw Him crucified. It shook him so badly that even when the other disciples told him the good news---"Christ is risen!"---he just couldn't believe it without proof. So a long hard week of doubting.....

How did he deal with it? Let's look at some specifics but because Thomas can

be a good example for us when we have our doubts.....

Number one--- He faced his doubt head on. He didn't try to deny or hide it. He admitted it to himself and to the other Disciples. To solve a problem, you have to admit there is a problem. He admitted he had a problem.....

Number two-- He did not cut himself off from the other Disciples. After all, how could they help him with his problem if they didn't know? He told them about his struggle very openly in verse 25 of today's gospel lesson---- "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my fingers into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

He kept in touch with the other Disciples ----and when they had another meeting, a liturgy actually I'm sure, on the next Sunday--- he showed up.

When we have doubts, like Thomas we should cling to our fellow believers, we should cling to the Church, not drift away. Come to the worship, ask for guidance from the priest, from deacons, from your brothers and sisters. Be like Thomas--- don't isolate.

Number three-- While in his time of doubt, Thomas stayed obedient to God. No evidence that he started going to wild parties, that he was nasty to others, that he went over to Christ's enemies like Judas had, etc. His faith was badly shaken, but he stayed faithful in how he lived. That is a very important point---*when his faith was shaken, he stayed faithful.*

That is a good way to check the sincerity of our doubts-----when we have our doubts about God, do we stay godly? Thomas did.

Number fours-- When Christ answered his doubts, Thomas quit doubting. We know that on the Sunday after the Resurrection, Jesus came again to the Disciples. He especially talked to Thomas and answered his doubts. Thomas accepted the answer. And his faith became so strong that he said to Christ—"My Lord and my God!"

Do you have doubts? Go ahead and ask questions and seek the answers. And when God answers, accept His answers.

So Thomas' time of doubt had a happy ending. At Vespers last night the hymn spoke of the "beautiful unbelief" of St. Thomas. How was it beautiful? Because it led to stronger faith than ever. He became a life-long missionary apostle to Christ, traveling to many lands. Eventually he went further than any other apostle, as far as India. And there he died as a martyr for Jesus Christ.

Honest and sincere doubt can be "beautiful unbelief" that leads to a stronger faith. That's what happened with Thomas.

So if you are having doubts, don't despair. Don't start drifting away from God and His Church. Don't stop praying. Be like St. Thomas-----seek out the answer.

And when God answers, be like St. Thomas---accept God's answer and believe.

We can be sure that Doubting Thomas doesn't doubt any more. Now he is in heaven, standing before the throne of God. There he worships and prays. Having doubts? Ask St. Thomas to pray for you and he will.