

Too Good to be True?

John 20:19-31

Crossroads Christian Church

1 Peter 1:3-9

April 27, 2014 Easter 2B

Easter is more than a day. Let's face it—the resurrection is so important, so central to our faith, and so complex a story that we can't possibly unpack it in a day. It's like a diamond, with many facets, always revealing new light. So, we have 7 weeks of Easter. Not to mention the fact that every Sunday is Easter Sunday.

Have you ever thought something was too good to be true? A lot of times you're right. That Nigerian diplomat isn't really going to put a million dollars into your bank account if you send him your account number. False hopes, unrealistic expectations, can lead us to cynicism and frustration. And if you're gullible, always believing what somebody else tells you, you're going to get burned. Yet, in spite of a world where cheating, cynicism, and greed seem to rule, there still is goodness. There still is truth. And something can be overwhelmingly good, and absolutely true. This leads us into the Gospel lesson for this first Sunday after Easter, the encounter of the risen and living Christ with his astounded disciples, especially Thomas—the one we often call doubting Thomas. Did you ever have the experience when you were young where you were skeptical about something an adult said—maybe mom, dad, or maybe a teacher—and they scolded you, "Now, don't be a doubting Thomas!" They made it sound like it was a bad thing to be—you should trust authority, especially theirs. Then, maybe, when we went to college, we learned that doubting isn't such a bad thing after all, that Thomas was on the right track—he needed proof, scientific evidence, before he would believe. After all, if nobody ever doubted conventional wisdom, wouldn't we still believe that the earth was flat? So

Thomas became the patron saint of the scientist, the rigorous thinker. "It ain't necessarily so," as the song goes.

Now here's something that I doubt—I doubt that either of those pictures of Thomas is accurate, and that either really tell us anything much about this wonderful story of an encounter between a faithful disciple and his risen Lord. Thomas isn't an object lesson, a bad role model. Neither is he a prophet of the scientific method, a good role model. He's an ordinary person, like you and me, caught up in an extraordinary situation.

Let's go back to the story. The world of the disciples had fallen apart at the seams. The cause that they believed in seemed crushed. Their dreams were shambles. That glorious vision of God's reign had become a nightmare of human brutality, of broken bones and spilled blood. The one they had thought was God's Messiah, God's Son, had died an accursed, dehumanizing death. In the midst of all that darkness, all that despair, there were rumors, stories about an empty tomb, but nobody knew quite what it all meant, or if it was just hope against hope. How could they confirm it? How could they know, against all the overwhelming evidence of his death, that Christ was alive?

The disciples were hiding behind closed doors on that Sunday evening—doors that were locked, chained, deadbolted. They were enemies of the state, enemies of the religious establishment, and they feared that they were next on the hit list. In the ultimate locked-room mystery, who should come in? Jesus. There he was, his wounds visible, so they would know that it was him. "Peace be with you," he said. "Shalom." It means hello, but it also meant, "It's okay. Don't panic. Don't be afraid." These poor disciples went wild with joy. "As the

Father sent me, so I send you," and he breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he told them. (Breathe and Spirit are the same word in Greek, so breathing on them meant that he gave them the Spirit.) He gave them power to forgive sins. The disciples confirmed that Christ was alive, and they were confirmed in their faith in him by receiving the Holy Spirit.

But wait. Someone was missing. Thomas wasn't there. Later, when they saw Thomas, they tried to tell him, probably while jumping up and down in excitement, as they shouted, "We have seen the Lord," but he wouldn't have it. "I have to see it for myself. I have to see the marks of the nails and put my hand on the wound on his side, or I will not believe."

Why did Thomas doubt? Why didn't he trust what the others had said? I think that it was because his heart had been broken, and he didn't want to be buoyed up by false hope. He wanted off the roller coaster of hope and despair. Thomas wasn't given to easy optimism, or to fantasy. Why set me up just to let me fall again, he might have wondered. Jesus coming back from the dead is too good to be true, so it must be false, he figured. So the disciples went their way, and Thomas went his.

The next Sunday, they gathered again to worship, and this time Thomas was with them. Again, they were behind locked doors. And again, here was Jesus, saying "Peace be with you." And who did he go to first? Thomas. It was a special guest appearance for his sake. Today, Jesus might have said, "Okay, Tom, here I am. It's really me, little buddy. See? You don't need to doubt me. It's real. I'm real." Jesus had gone out of his way to put Thomas at peace. "Peace be with you" wasn't just a greeting, it was the greatest gift that could be given to a grieving, crushed heart. Thomas's heart had been

turned to stone by the pain of Good Friday; now it was a heart made to be filled with the love of the living Jesus Christ.

“My Lord and my God!” Thomas said, falling to his knees. “My Lord, and my God.” Here’s Thomas, was confessing his faith. “Do you accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” we ask when someone comes down the aisle. Thomas said, “My Lord, and my God.”

Many of us, like Thomas, have had moments of despair and grief. This congregation has experienced some very painful losses and knows what it is to grieve. You’ve had saints of the church transfer their membership to heaven. And you’ve grieved. Such grief is real, it’s natural, it’s necessary. But we’re not like those without hope. Thomas didn’t trust hope, and had given into hopelessness until the risen Christ gave him a hope that can never be lost.

Jesus accepted Thomas’s confession of faith, “My Lord and my God,” given after Thomas had seen the evidence; but went on to say, “happy are those who don’t see yet believe.” Later, Peter would pick up on that theme in his first letter, which we heard earlier. He told about the new life that believers would have in Christ, and how this new life would be strong enough to endure even under persecution. Then he said, “although you’ve never seen him, you love him. Even though you don’t see him now, you trust him.” Maybe Peter was remembering those words of Jesus “happy are those who don’t see yet believe” when he wrote to later believers, “although you’ve never seen him, you love him.” We don’t have the first-hand evidence that Thomas did that Jesus had risen from the grave. Yet we believe. Yet we love. We have the words of scripture, and we have experienced the love of the risen Christ in our lives. What a blessing. What a joy. What love.

That's the message of Easter. We worship a risen Christ, and in Christ we have the gift of new life. Is that message, that presence, that life too good to be true? No, it's the one and only thing that's too good NOT to be true, for it is based upon the power and steadfast love of God. Christ is alive, and suddenly appears in the locked rooms of our own grief, our own fear, our own despair, and then we experience a joy that can never die. Then we all can fall to our own knees and say, "My Lord and my God!" Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon