

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, 23.iv.2006, 10:00 a.m.
Commemoration of Toyohiko Kagawa † 1960
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue, Pennsylvania
Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; I John 1:2-2; John 20:19-31 (the Confession of Thomas the Apostle)
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come. ✠ Amen.

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then He said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe. Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

– John 20:26-29

There is no more graphic scene in the entire New Testament than this one, because the details are described by the words in such a way as to leave little to the imagination. And yet, our imagination does lead us to supply details that are not there. For example, it is so easy for most of us to sympathize with Thomas in his demand for tangible proof of the Resurrection of Jesus that we simply assume that he followed through with his stated

wish and did as Jesus directed, actually touching the wounds of the Crucified. Christian art has often depicted just such a scene:



But the sacred text itself suggests that Thomas no longer wanted to do that, even though the Risen Christ clearly invites him to. Confronted with the whole person of the Risen One, now receiving Jesus' Spirit of peace with the others present, he responds in words that remind us either of Peter's confession of faith at Cæsarea Philippi or perhaps the last time we were startled out of our wits by something when Thomas blurts out, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas had arrived at the place in his spirit, mind and body called 'faith.' Jesus makes Thomas and all of the other Apostles and Disciples look ahead to the rest of the Church's life over the vast expanse of time when Our Lord declares those like us blessed, because we "have not seen and yet have come to believe." But faith for Thomas was not only a destination. It was a point of departure for an apostolate that would take him to found the Church in Persia, in Armenia and in India, where he was martyred by means of the spear he is often shown holding in Christian art. The Apostle Thomas is also often shown holding a Bible and a builder's square. Perhaps the only carpenter in the circle of the Twelve, he is said to have built a palace for an Indian ruler before his death. There has been a Christian community continuously in existence near his place of martyrdom down to this very day. Diaconal Minister at Saint James Evangelical Lutheran Church in Gettysburg, Barbara

Schmitthenner, once served on the staff of the Lutheran Hospital located near that holy mountain.

It may seem easy to see how Thomas comes to have faith, but how do we?

For some, this question may seem simple enough. One just believes by an act of the will, obediently banishing all doubt and questioning because of the One Who is the object of faith. Theology calls this 'fideism,' just believing, believing without argument or reason, suspicious in fact of all arguments for and against the revelation of God, suspicious also of all arguments and thought that would ground faith in reason. In a decisive act of moral acceptance, Jesus' Lordship is accepted over the believer's life and one is thus saved, saved both from sin and death and saved also from thought and doubt.

If that were the true nature of faith, then Thomas should certainly have been able to achieve it by act of the will without seeing, hearing and touching, or being invited to touch the Risen

Christ. But neither He nor any other Disciple or Apostle came to faith that way. Not one of them says, publicly or privately as far as we know, “You know, I remember His teaching about dying on the Cross and rising on the third day, and I have just decided to believe that.” Not even His Blessed Mother, who had been told the secret of the whole mystery by the Angel Gabriel, is remembered to have come to faith in that way, by simply deciding to.

No. They all experience fear and grief. They all doubt. They all, like the women at the tomb, assume that Jesus was sadly mistaken about His life and the whole business. They all expect a corpse, not the risen *Corpus Christi*, the living, breathing, speaking, bodily presence of the Risen Lord. And they all experience the real presence, the unexpected and shocking presence of Christ in their midst, the women at the empty tomb and in the garden, these in the Upper Room, and others on the road to Emmaus. Each, in his or her own way,

respond to that presence in which the Holy Spirit is active, creating faith where before there was sadness, despair and perhaps no small measure of sinful bitterness at having been misled. Each Disciple was *and is* called by the Holy Spirit, in the midst of doubt, sadness and despair and receives the grace to respond to that call with full confidence and trust. That is what the Church of the New Testament means by *faith*.

The opposite of faith is not doubt. Doubt is the act of an honest, functioning mind, doubt in the form of hard questioning where grand claims are concerned, especially claims about God and the promises of God. A doubt that searches, but that also listens for a Word that only God could speak, is the human material of faith, a human foundation on which the Holy Spirit can build chapels, churches and cathedrals in each believing heart and mind. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is *sin*.

Sin, that determined attempt to substitute *my* will for God's will and the neighbor's good, refuses to hear a word from outside the ego, and does not listen for such a word. Sin, in the form of selfish desire, wrath, lust or whatever form it may take, particularly does *not* listen for that Word which calls me to a higher level, above and beyond myself. Faith is clearly present where that call is heard and listened for again and again in a human life.

One example of such faith, a life which itself constitutes the Holy Spirit's call to faith, is found in the life and witness of Toyohiko Kagawa. Born in 1888 in Kobe, Japan, the illegitimate son of a nobleman, he was orphaned early, he living first with his widowed stepmother and then with an uncle. He enrolled in a Bible class in order to learn English, and in his teens he became a Christian and was disowned by his family. In his late teens, he attended Presbyterian College in Tokyo for three years. He decided that he had a vocation to help the poor, and that in

order to do so effectively he must live as one of them. Accordingly, from 1910 to 1924 he lived for all but two years in a shed six feet square in the slums of Kobe. In 1912 he unionized the shipyard workers. He spent two years (1914-1916) at Princeton studying techniques for the relief of poverty. In 1918 and 1921 he organized unions among factory workers and among farmers. He worked for universal male suffrage (granted in 1925) and for laws more favorable to trade unions. In 1923 he was asked to supervise social work in Tokyo. His writings began to attract favorable notice from the Japanese government and abroad. He established credit unions, schools, hospitals, and churches, and wrote and spoke extensively on the application of Christian principles to the ordering of society. He founded the Anti-War League, and in 1940 was arrested after publicly apologizing to China for the Japanese invasion of that country. In the summer of 1941 he visited the United States in an attempt to avert war between Japan and the US. After the war, despite failing health,

he devoted himself to the reconciliation of democratic ideals and procedures with traditional Japanese culture. He died in Tokyo on this date in 1960.

Toyohiko Kagawa was fond of saying, “Love is creation taken to a higher degree.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ, encountered in his case in a class he took in order to learn English, took him beyond the traditional Japanese reverence for the natural creation to the reverence for every human being and living thing, to that universal Christ-like love the vast majority of his countrymen took and still take as a sign of weakness. Did he doubt before believing? I am sure he did. But he heard in the midst of his doubt a Word of grace, a Word of love, and, for him, a Word of new life that no human being of his experience and culture could have or would have spoken. Did Toyohiko Kagawa stop doubting once he started believing? No. But he transferred his doubt from the teaching of the Church to the structures of society, structures of poverty and backbreaking

toil and misery he refused to believe were necessary. The result was a small miracle in the reorganization of peoples' lives on the basis of hope that even non-believers had to respect and honor.

Where do you and I hear the Holy Spirit's call to faith? We need not pretend to have no doubts, to pass unquestioningly through this world of deliberate injustice and things that simply do not add up. It is into *this* life and into *our* midst that the Risen Christ enters to offer us His peace and to call us to faith. Let us welcome Him, as we permit Him to enter through the barriers of our doubt and fear, as we receive Him as food for both body and spirit, with the words of one who dared to doubt and dared also to believe, and to finally pay for that belief with his life in a land far, far from his earthly home. With Thomas we confess as the Holy Spirit calls us through the Gospel: 'My Lord and my God!' ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

