

## COMING TO BELIEVE

### Easter 2 – Cycle C: Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31; Mark 9:14-50

Twice in today's Gospel, the author records the phrase "come to believe" when talking about Jesus' disciples. In the first instance, we hear these words from Jesus himself in a teaching proceeding from his encounter with Thomas. Referring to his resurrection, Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have *come to believe*."

The second time we hear the phrase, it is from John, the author of the same reading. He says to us, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples...but these are written so that you may *come to believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

I like the honesty of the phrase "come to believe". It suggests that faith in the power and love of God is something that grows and develops; that we are works-in-progress. In today's Gospel, we are present both as the disciples and as Thomas. Like the disciples, we have fears that imprison us, as surely as fear had led the disciples to hide and lock themselves inside their house in Jerusalem. And like Thomas, we doubt, because doubt and faith co-exist in human experience.

There is an incident in Mark's gospel that speaks honestly of the struggle for faith. A man, desperate for the wellbeing of his son, has brought him to Jesus for healing: the boy has extreme convulsions during which he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, thrashes about, and becomes rigid. He cannot speak and he cannot hear. Jesus' disciples have been unsuccessful in trying to heal the boy, and this failure is reflected in the father's appeal to Jesus. He says to Jesus, "...if you are *able* to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus flashes back, "If [I am] able! All things can be done for the one who believes." And then comes the phrase we remember because it rings true of our encounters with both faith and doubt. The father of the boy cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

In a ritual we would describe as an exorcism, Jesus heals the boy, takes him by the hand and, Mark tells us, the boy was able to stand. Privately, the disciples ask Jesus how it was that he succeeded where they had failed. Why could they not cast out the spirit that was afflicting the boy? Jesus says to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer." Prayer, we learn through this episode in Mark's gospel, is faith's partner. Earlier in the passage, Jesus reprimands the disciples for their lack of faith. We have doubts, we have failures, this passage discloses; but we also have prayer, Jesus teaches, the means of grace in which we can turn to God and gain the strength we need for the challenges we face.

And the good news of the gospel is represented in both the passage we read from John and in this passage from Mark: Christ comes to us amid our great doubts and in our great needs, removing those doubts and meeting those needs.

Today's Gospel also makes mention of the Holy Spirit. In a foreshadowing of Pentecost and an echo of the Genesis account of God's breathing life into the first human so that it became a "living soul", Jesus breathes on the disciples, saying to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus clearly wants to equip them for mission: he prefaces his gift of the Spirit with a commission. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he says to them. The Spirit, we learn, will minister to them and mentor them when Jesus is no longer present with them in body. The Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of the Risen Christ. And it is a gift that is given to Jesus' followers in community.

Faith also is a gift that is given to the whole community of disciples in order that God's ministry through Jesus may continue. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," Jesus says.

Our First Reading takes us forward in time from Jesus' first visits to his disciples, post-Resurrection. In the passage from Acts, the disciples have been so filled with the Spirit that they have lost all their fear and are devoting themselves entirely to extending Jesus' mission of bringing repentance to Israel and proclaiming the gospel of God's love, power, mercy, and forgiveness as revealed in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are a force to be reckoned with, and in today's reading from Acts, we find them arrested for a second time by the Temple police and called to account by the Sanhedrin Council, the same council that conspired against Jesus.

What is remarkable about this encounter is that the disciples are not and cannot be intimidated. They are so thoroughly convinced of Jesus' resurrection that they do not fear their own death. And so we see them, again and again, returning to the temple (of all places!) to teach the crowds there of Jesus, reveal him as the Son of the living God, and then connect the dots for people concerning the sign of his death and resurrection. Fear and doubt and unbelief are no longer part of their vocabulary. And it is Jesus' willingness to walk the way of the Cross and the subsequent revelation of God's resurrection power that have inspired their testimony. The Holy Spirit and the real presence of Christ in their experience has called them to bless others with the peace and joy that they themselves have received. It has taken time and experience and the grace of God for them to "come to believe", but here, in the Book of Acts, we see their love of Jesus and his gospel overflowing. Echoing their announcement to Thomas, everything they now say and do proclaims, "We have seen the Lord!"

For us in our time, we need both today's Gospel and this account from the Book of Acts. We can find ourselves in both places – times when our lives are filled with questions; and times when the signs of God's power and presence are so clear, we can do nothing but pray prayers of gratitude with every breath we breathe. Life is a struggle, and life is good: both things are true. But between these two extremes is this the understanding that none of our experience, either individually or together as we form Christ's church, is lived beyond the grasp of grace. We "come to believe" because Christ comes to us, over and over again – in community, in prayer, in Word, in Sacrament, and always in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' disciples, Scripture teaches us, are works-in-progress. The good news in Jesus is that God never gives up on us.