

When I read today's Gospel text, the first thing that popped into my mind was the first question I ask my confirmation students at the start of our year together: What is the difference between knowing and believing?

To know something is to have an understanding of, or to be personally familiar with something. I know that the sun rises in the east. I know if I touch a hot iron with my bare hand, I will be burned. I know that the free prize in the cereal box is never at the top. These are things I *know*.

To believe is to have an opinion or a firm conviction of the reality of something – I believe the MN Vikings are not Super Bowl bound any time soon; to believe is also to accept on faith that something unseen is true – I believe that Jesus came to give me new life.

In our conversations, we talk about how hard it is sometimes to accept things on faith and how much easier it is to know something through experience rather than take it on faith through someone else's word. That's how we're wired. How many of us were told by our mothers not to do this or that because we would get hurt or we'd break something, but we did it anyway, because we needed to see for ourselves that it was true. We needed to experience it for ourselves.

It was the same with the disciples. They had been told earlier in the day by Mary Magdalene that she had seen Jesus. But there was no response on the part of the disciples, no rejoicing or exclamations of joy or faith. In fact, when Jesus appears to them that evening, he finds them hiding in fear behind locked doors. It's not until he shows them his wounds that they believe and rejoice. When they tell Thomas about seeing Jesus, his reaction really isn't that much different than their's had been when they were told by Mary that she had seen Jesus; he's skeptical and says that he needs to see just what they saw in order to believe; he needs to experience Jesus himself. "I'll believe it when I see it." When Jesus reappears a week later, he does not rebuke Thomas for his unbelief. Instead, he invites Thomas to come and see so that he may believe, and then he blesses those who will come to believe in him without that in-the-flesh encounter.

But there's a sentence here that I want to say a bit about because it tends to be misinterpreted and that misinterpretation has caused unnecessary anguish over the years. "Do not doubt, but believe." It implies that doubt is the opposite of belief; it has been interpreted that doubt is a bad thing. There are some that hold that, if you're a *good* Christian, you have no doubt. And then, when we do experience doubt, because that is part of human nature, we feel ashamed or fearful. We believe that we are *bad* Christians. But doubt is not the opposite of belief; the opposite of belief is *unbelief*. Unbelief is a deliberate decision to reject what we are asked to believe. Doubt, on the other hand, is intertwined with faith. As Thomas Merton writes, "You can't have faith without doubt. Doubt and faith are two sides of the same thing. Faith is not the

suppression of doubt. It is the overcoming of doubt, and you overcome doubt by going through it." Doubt means we are seeking answers and I encourage the youth not to shy away from their doubt because it's a normal part of the faith journey; it's an opportunity to grow and strengthen our faith in Christ.

The last conversation I have with my students before they are confirmed ties in with another important part of today's text, which are the Pentecost verses where Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples and sends them to witness to unbelievers. You'll hear a lot more about Pentecost in June. What I tell the kids is this: Tell. Your. Story. There are an ever growing number of 'Thomases' today who crave, who *need* that first-hand experience in order to know Christ. They are hiding behind locked doors, afraid to believe, afraid to accept on faith the good news that Jesus has risen and given them new life. We are called to share the light and love of Christ with unbelievers but that is a hard thing for Lutherans to do. It puts us way outside of our comfort zones. We don't want to impose and we certainly don't want to force our beliefs down anyone's throat. But it doesn't have to be that dramatic. You don't have to stand on a street corner with a bullhorn or go door to door. It can be as simple as just sharing what God has done in your life, just sharing your personal experiences with Christ.

In mainstream media, the loudest "Christian" voices belong to those like Pat Robertson or the Fred Phelps family, those who preach intolerance and hate and call it the Gospel. Those few paint all the rest of us the same shade in the eyes of unbelievers. If those are the only voices that unbelievers hear, how will they ever know that God is anything different than an angry, vengeful God? If *we* don't speak up and make *our* voices heard, how will they ever know that God's message is of love and hope and peace and that he accepts us in our humanness and our doubt? How will they know? So *tell your story*, that others might come to believe and have life in Christ's name. Amen.