

“I BELIEVE; HELP MY UNBELIEF!”

(DOUBTING THOMAS)

Scripture: John 20:19-31

Gracious God, we pray that you will bless and anoint these words, and that these words might really be your words for us. We pray in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

In February 1986, the whole world had the privilege of watching history unfold from their front row seats. I am talking about the People Power revolution, which led to the ouster of President Ferdinand Marcos and his family. All over the world, people's eyes were glued to their TV seats for the evening news. In some instances, live coverage was available, thanks to the tremendously advancing technology of the major networks. Among the most interesting footages that we saw on TV were those taken inside Malacanang Palace after the Marcoses hastily left. This has been hidden from the public for too long, and the people have long indulged in a guessing game as to whether rumors circulating around were true or not.

We in the Philippines found it more interesting that the footages inside Malacanang Palace showed a room adjoining the President's bedroom, where there was a hospital bed complete with all the IV hookups and monitoring equipment. And on the table next to it was left a book on caring for a kidney transplant patient. That just substantiated the rumor that Marcos was terribly ill during those last several years, contrary to what the people were made to believe. He, indeed, had a kidney transplant, and to the Philippine audience, that was the biggest revelation.

But here in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world, they did not pay too much attention to that. The biggest revelation brought about by the media incursions in Malacanang was that Imelda had 2000 pairs of shoes! It was so amusing that in the midst of the seriousness of the whole situation, the media found it more fitting to spotlight Imelda's shoes. Never mind the threat to the cameraman's safety. Never mind the fact that a big, sudden, potentially violent change of government was underway. Never mind what the Marcoses have done, for better or for worse, in their 20 years of power. Imelda is forever remembered for her shoes!

There is a character in the Bible who is similarly notoriously remembered. I'm talking about Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ, who was basically a good man, a faithful and obedient disciple, but because of one small encounter in the Scriptures, is forever remembered as a Doubter. Never mind what he did before or after that episode, never mind that he eventually believed what he initially doubted. But the media -- and I allude here to the writer of the book of John, as well as all the

other redactors through the years -- have seen it fit to spotlight Thomas as a Doubter.

Doubt is something that comes naturally to man. According to Pascal, "To deny, to believe, and to doubt absolutely — this is for man what running is for a horse." We encounter doubt everyday. Too often, the term 'doubt' or a 'doubting mind' is held to a negative connotation. Too often, it suggests weakness, indecision, ignorance or a lack of enthusiasm to move ahead. Some people equate doubt in that manner. But it is not always so.

Doubt can also be useful. Doubt can also be good. If we didn't doubt we would believe everything we see, or hear or read. As I have grown older I have learned to doubt everything I hear; especially all the junk on the internet. If I get an email saying that such and such happened, or warning me about this upcoming disaster or that computer virus, or telling me the hidden 'facts' about Obama or Clinton or McCain, and I have to forward this email to all the people I know, I check it out very carefully because so often it's just a big hoax. I receive emails everyday from people supposedly from Nigeria who want me to help them bring their millions of dollars into the U.S., promising to give me a huge share of the stash — a very attractive offer. But we all know that there is no money coming — that this is a scam to entice people and milk them of their hard-earned savings. It's a hoax! There are so many information going around in emails, that sometimes I surmise that if people would just entertain a little doubt and check the accuracy of the information, instead of just forwarding emails indiscriminately, this world would probably be much better.

As the most intelligent species of God's creations, we human beings have the propensity, among others, to constantly express doubt, to ask questions about practically everything. From the time we learned to speak as a toddler until we grow old, our curiosity always leads us to ask why. Why? Why?

Have you ever wondered "Why people ask why?" Here are some "Why?" questions that I think are worth asking.

Why are there Interstate highways in Hawaii?

Why are there floatation devices under airplane seats instead of parachutes?

If a 7-11 is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, why are there locks on the doors?

Why do they put braille dots on the keypad of the drive-up ATM?

Why do we drive on parkways and park on driveways?

Why is it that when you transport something by car it's called a shipment. But when you transport something by ship it's called cargo?

Why is abbreviation such a long word?

There are so many more of these "Why" questions which you probably received in an email at some point in time. Human beings just don't stop asking questions.

Years ago, there was an advertisement on TV for a motorcycle company. The ad was very eye-catching because across the TV screen, questions would be flashed one after the other, very quickly, faster than the eye can read. They were questions just about everything, ranging from difficult questions like why man exists, to how old is the universe; to easy questions like what detergent do you use, or which fastfood restaurant do you prefer, and those things. And then after awhile, the questions stop coming and there appears a silhouette of a motorcycle and then in bold letters, it says: YAMAHA: It may not be the answer, but at least it's not another question.

We usually equate a questioning mind with a doubtful mind. If you have questions, you are presumed to be having doubts about something. And in the English language, we always encounter the idiom Doubting Thomas when we refer to someone who refuses to believe anything until they are given proof. This idiom is widely accepted as part of the English vocabulary that for awhile I was wondering where this phrase came from. Who was Thomas and why do we always refer to him as doubting? That used to be my question, until in a Bible class somebody pointed out to me the 20th chapter of John, our Gospel reading for today.

Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening. When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

And so Thomas the Apostle has evermore been known as Thomas the Doubter.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Thomas never says a single word. Only in John's gospel does Thomas speak up on three separate occasions. Twice he speaks just a single sentence but his third appearance in John 20 is more significant. Poor Thomas: he speaks at length just one time in the whole Bible and he is forever thereafter known as "Doubting Thomas!" Make one little mistake and you're labeled for life.

Jesus returned a week later, and this time Thomas was present. It's interesting to note how Jesus dealt with Thomas. Jesus didn't say, "You disappointed me, Thomas!" He didn't say, "You're fired. You're not a part of the team anymore!"

Listen carefully to what Jesus said to Thomas the Doubter. First, he said to Thomas and all the disciples, "Peace be with you" — a kind and comforting word.

Then he turned to Thomas and said: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." (John 20:27).

Keep in mind that Thomas had said there was only one way for him to believe. He said that he would have to see the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands; and put his finger in the marks to test them; and put his hand in the wound in Jesus' side. Thomas probably said, "That is what it will take to get me to believe."

So I would imagine Jesus saying, in effect, “OK, Thomas. Here are my hands. Here are the nail marks. Go ahead! Touch them. Here is the wound in my side. Go ahead! Put your hand there!”

And then Jesus said, “Do not doubt, but believe.”

To which Thomas responded by saying, “My Lord and my God!”

The scripture account did not say that Thomas actually touched the wounds of Jesus. It was enough that he saw them, and with that all his doubts disappeared and he believed very sincerely in his heart of hearts that indeed Jesus has risen from the dead. “My Lord and my God!” was all Thomas could utter in awe and reverence.

Jesus then said: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29).

That’s one of my favorite verses in the Bible, because it applies to me — and it applies to you. “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.” We have not seen Jesus physically, but we have believed. And Jesus blesses us for doing that.

But if we are honest, we will confess that we too have doubted. If we are thoughtful at all about our faith, we will sometimes find ourselves asking, “Was Jesus real? Was he the Son of God? Is there a heaven? Can I go there?”

The story of Doubting Thomas in the Bible helps us to deal with questions like that. First it deals with a very real problem that all of us experience — doubt. Second, it shows us that Jesus is sympathetic to our needs, forgiving of our doubts. Jesus didn’t condemn Thomas for his doubts, but instead gave Thomas what he needed so that he could believe. And third, Jesus knew that there would be other Christians in the future — people like you and me — who would never see him in the flesh. So he pronounced a special blessing on people like us. He said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

I cannot help but go back to the history of our Fil-Am UCC. From the very beginning, through all its ups and downs, we have always been confronted with the issue of doubt. From the very beginning we always had questions on our minds. Can we find enough Filipinos around to start a church? Is there a place or building where we can worship? Can we afford to pay rent? Can we afford to pay our pastor? Can we afford to pay our pianist or organist? Those were some of our organizational doubts. In addition to those, we were constantly confronted with doubts as to our theology, our philosophy, our mission and vision, our reason for being what we are. At times our discussions would lead us to ask: Is it our purpose for our church to increase in membership? Or is it to just be the expression of God’s love to everyone. Do we focus our ministry only to people who are like us -- who look like us, who talk like us, who eat like us, whose views are like ours, whose immigration status are like ours? Or do we just go ahead and express God’s love as revealed to us by Christ, to everybody regardless of their circumstances, wherever they are on life’s journey? There were so

many questions that we were asking in the past. And you know what? Those questions are still being asked today.

When I was asked to speak about our church at the Metro Association meeting in Spring of 2006, I told them that we have a congregation that is thriving solely on faith. I said we have three problems: First, we do not have a building (that was after Union told us that they were selling the building and so we would have to look for another place to rent). Second, we do not have a Pastor (Pastor Gerenia has just retired). And, third, we do not have money. I said those are our three pressing problems. And what keeps us going — that only thing that keeps us going — is our unrelenting faith in God and God's faithfulness to us. We know there's a reason why God has assembled us in this place at this time as a Fil-Am UCC.

Pastor Cheryl of Pilgrim Church, who heard my talk, came up to me afterwards and suggested that we look into the possibility of sharing space in their church. It is this church where we are now. A few months after that meeting, Pastor Bong accepted our invitation to join us and be our pastor.

Our prayers have sustained us through our doubts, and God has rewarded us immensely by our faithfulness. God gave us a decent, comfortable and beautiful building (to rent). God gave us a conscientious and deeply spiritual pastor. But, of course, we still do not have money. God is still speaking and working on it.

Dr. Proceso Udarbe, in talking about the brighter side of doubt, said, "Someone has observed that Thomas is called the Twin. This means he should have a twin brother or sister. But no amount of scholarly research has yielded the identity of his twin. And therefore, the point for us is that, in a way of speaking, you and I are the twin brothers and sisters of Thomas. We are all doubters," concludes Dr. Udarbe.

I believe that most Christians — even the great Christians — have moments of doubts. We all have a bit of Doubting Thomas in us.

After Mother Teresa died a few years ago, there were a number of articles published about her doubts. Many people could hardly believe that Mother Teresa had doubts. She had become an icon of faith, of humanitarian service, of faithfulness to God. She led an exemplary life of faith. But in letters to her spiritual mentors, she once wrote: "I am told that God lives in me; and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."

She also wrote: "Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul."

How can it be that such a saintly woman could experience such spiritual pain; could entertain such serious doubt? I like what Archbishop Henry D'Souza said in response to the discovery of those letters of Mother Teresa. He said that the letters

showed that Mother Teresa was “both holy and human.” This is a meaningful dichotomy that we can relate to. D’Souza may as well have said this about each of us. Mother Teresa was holy and human. And so are we. She had faith and she had doubts. So do we.

It might be just coincidence, but Thomas and Teresa had something in common. Teresa had ministry among the very poorest people of India. According to early tradition, Thomas was the first missionary to India.

So what can we learn from Doubting Thomas and Doubting Teresa?

One of the most important things that we can learn is that Jesus comes to us in the midst of our doubts and our tribulations. He comes not to condemn but to help.

Jesus comes to us in many guises:

- To Thomas, he came personally — in the flesh.
- To Mother Teresa he came in the form of a child who needed teaching, and a leper who needed shelter, and an old person who needed help because he was dying.
- Christ might come to you on one day as a person who helps you, and on another day as a person who needs your help.
- Christ might come to you as a helpful word from this pulpit, or as a helpful word from scripture, or as the bread and wine during Communion.

So one thing that we can learn is that Christ comes to us even in our darkest moments, and he comes to help us.

We can also learn from Doubting Thomas and Doubting Teresa that it’s important to surround ourselves with Christian witnesses when besieged by doubt or tribulations or hopelessness. Thomas found Christ in the midst of the other disciples. Mother Teresa found help from her spiritual mentors.

And finally, we can learn from the words that Jesus said to Doubting Thomas. Jesus said, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Let me remind you who Jesus was talking about. He was talking about you. He was talking about me. We have not been privileged to see Jesus in the flesh, but we believe anyway. And so Jesus has given us a special blessing — what some have called his Last Beatitude — “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

And how do we, we who do believe, convince others to believe? It was easy for the disciples to convince Thomas. They just waited around until Jesus showed up again. I can just imagine Peter pointing to Jesus and saying, “See Thomas, I told you so.” But what physical evidence do we have to point toward, to prove that Jesus is alive?

I think Jesus was aware of our dilemma, that’s why he said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” You know what? We may not have the living breathing body of Jesus to point to, but there is still evidence. One evidence of the

truth of the resurrection is the living presence of Christ in us. We can't see, hear or touch the risen Christ but we can experience his life in our lives. We can feel his living presence. Wherever two or more are gathered in his name he is there.

If you doubt what I say, I can prove it to you. Look around you. Look at everyone in this room. We are the living breathing body of Christ, with all our wounds, with all our brokenness, with all our pains, with all our problems, with all our tears and laughters, with all our joys, with all our doubts and faith. And we are most definitely alive!

In the Gospel of Mark, a father came to Jesus seeking help for his son, who had terrible convulsions which sometimes caused him to fall into the fire. Jesus said, "If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes." The father then cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24).

I would like to invite you to make that our prayer: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

Amen.

March 30, 2008