

Easter 2A, April 16, 2023

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Last Monday was the 100th day of 2023. That day marked the 146th mass shooting in the United States. Let us take a moment of silence to remember the lives lost on Monday, the lives who've been changed forever and the victims yet to come. (Pause)

Lord, have mercy. Amen.

Each year on this Sunday after Easter, we hear the Gospel story about Saint Thomas. I won't put "Doubting" before his name because I think that belittles and dishonors him.

I can tell you that, personally, I don't appreciate being labeled. Who does? There's much more to St. Thomas than the word doubting but if that's all you ever hear of his story how would you know?

I'll tell you a little more of what I've learned later. First though, I'll share a story, with you, about labeling people. Some of you may have heard me share it before.

Years ago, 2005 actually, Dave and I were in Maine in January. Let me tell you. It was cold. Really cold. Not 70 degree cold where you take your slippers off and put your sneakers and socks on.

The kind of cold I don't ever care to experience again. We were in a van with 2 other couples riding to the huge Eddie Bauer store in Portland.

There isn't much else to do there in the dead of winter and the place is sort of like a small city unto itself.

One of the couples, riding with us, had recently moved to the United States from South Africa. They are a White couple and I mention that only to put the story into context.

You see they'd been born and raised in South Africa during apartheid. They decided to leave South Africa in protest when apartheid ended. They'd loved apartheid.

It's hatred and systematic oppression of Black people had worked out quite well for their lifestyle. When it ended, they no longer wanted to live in a country where they were not seen as the superior class simply because of the color of their skin.

Well, here we are in a van together trying to be pleasant, with one another.

I'd been told they might make a racist joke or two and I was asked could I be polite about it to which I replied, "No, I wouldn't be able to just sit and be polite."

It is my policy never to sit passively when someone makes a hurtful racist or sexist so called joke.

It was uncomfortable. But we did our best to make nice.

The husband of the couple said to me, "By the way. Good news. We've just learned we are now American citizens. Our paperwork has come through."

I said, "Congratulations. You're now African Americans."

A look of horror came across their faces. Absolute horror. They both hurried to correct me as if I my words needed immediate rectifying. Maybe I was some sort of idiot or something.

In excited voices, they said: "No, no. You're African American. Not us."

Very calmly, I said, "Well, Let's think about this for a moment. Now, you were born and raised in Africa and now you are Americans.

Me, I was born in Connecticut. I've lived in America my entire life. I've never even been to Africa. But I do hope to visit there, someday. Seems to me that you're much more African American than I am."

You can imagine we didn't speak much after that.

Sometimes, in the news, I hear Vice President Kamala Harris referred to as African American.

With a father who emigrated to the United States from British Jamaica and a mother who emigrated from India, I wonder where the African comes in. See what I mean about labels?

Anyway, back to Thomas.

What did he actually want? He only wanted exactly what everybody else got to have- to see the Lord!

Who could blame him? Think about it. Wouldn't you have wanted to see him? Mary saw him. The other disciples saw him. He simply wanted the same proof each one of them had received.

A week earlier, the other ten were in the house, without Thomas, when Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

They had seen Jesus and yet remained locked away. Didn't that mean they also had doubt? They'd just seen Jesus resurrected from the dead and had received the Holy Spirit.

You'd think they'd have been out doing something amazing with all that.

But, somehow they escaped being labeled doubters. And who among us doesn't doubt, at times, or have questions?

We have doubt and questions when there is a terrible diagnosis for ourselves or someone we care deeply for. When bad things happen to good people.

When we see children suffer and are helpless to stop it.

Sometimes I wonder:

Where exactly is the intersection between faith and science? How does that all work?

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

When I see injustice, I wonder, why does it take so darn long? I just want that arc to bend a bit faster.

I think we all wonder, at times, Why are we all here and What does it all mean?

Often, I wonder what exactly will it take to end the gun violence in this country.

How many mass shootings and loss of life will be enough?

We all have questions. We are curious and yes at times we may have doubts but thankfully we haven't been burdened with carrying the label of "Doubting" in front of our names for eternity, like St. Thomas.

He was so much more than that. Here's a little more about him.

There is plenty of clear evidence from Christians in India that Thomas went all the way to India from Palestine and brought many to the Christian faith even though THEY had not seen the resurrected Jesus.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

He arrived, in India, from Palestine by boat. He'd traveled down the Red Sea and across the Persian Gulf to the port of Crananore, which had been a Roman spice trading and slave girl market center.

There St. Thomas is said, with the aid of miracles, to have converted local Brahmins to Christianity and to have built 7 churches.

He was later martyred and his followers built a tomb and monastery over his grave.

It's become a pilgrimage centre for not only Christians but for Muslim and Hindus as well, in southern India.

Two thousand years later there are people in India known as St. Thomas Christians. That's quite a legacy and enough, I believe to remove the "D" word label from in front of his name. (Pause)

Labeling a person or groups of people is something we all are guilty of slipping into at one time or another.

There is something special we Episcopalians have to help us, when we do, and that is our Baptismal Covenant. Just last Sunday we renewed our vows to :

Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We vowed to: Strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

And I would add, we respect the dignity of every human being when we cease to label people and we see

people as individuals.

We are free to return to those vows anytime we want to, pray for forgiveness when we need to and begin again.

We can live this vows out in the world and be examples to others and true to our Christian values. That's how we make positive change in the world. Begin with those around us.

You see, much of the hatred we see in the world begins with a simple act of seeing someone else as "the other." Apartheid. Holocaust. Segregation. Ethnic Cleansing. Civil War. Slavery. All of that hate was directed at people who were "the other." (Pause)

I'll return to where I began today and that is with mass shootings and the senseless loss of life in our country. It happens in all the places we and our loved ones frequent—Schools, movie theaters, stores, places of worship, night clubs and last Monday in a bank.

Bishop Bob has done something that makes me really proud and sad both at the same time. Proud that he's done it but sad that he felt he had to do this to help keep us all safe.

At his initiative, the Standing Committee and Diocese Council have adopted a resolution prohibiting the possession of firearms on any Episcopal Church property in our state. (Pause).

After the shooting, last year, at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry encouraged Episcopalians to visit the website: bishopsagainstgunviolence.org and he prayed these words:

Help us as a nation to find ways to bring an end to this scourge of violence, which hurts your children and our human family.

Give us the strength we need, the courage we must have, and the faith in you that will see us through.

All this we pray and ask in the name of the prince of peace—your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.