

Year A, April 23, 2017
2 Easter
Christ Church, Mexia

When I was in the Army, I worked for a Colonel who was very colorful. He was from Tennessee and stood 6'6"-6'8" and was imposing by his nature as well as physical size. He had a sign above the door to his office that had a lightning bolt on each end with the words "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" in between them. As you stood there to knock before entering, it really made you think – especially because he had started his command by walking through the staff offices, pointing to certain persons and telling them to pack up and leave. You wanted to be sure you were ready, had no doubt, before engaging him.

Doubt is, of course, the topic of conversation each year on this Sunday. It is the scripture that causes the Apostle Thomas' to be labeled "Doubting Thomas." And that normally leads us to believe that doubting is wrong, or a lack of faith. But shouldn't we doubt some of the things we know about Jesus? After all, most of the accounts we have of his life and work come from fishermen.

There is perhaps another reason we don't like doubt - we tend to be uncomfortable with uncertainty. And we can always cite stories to support our point. For example, "the Associated Press (once) ran the story of Andre-Francois Raffray. Thirty years (prior), at the age of 47, he worked out a real estate deal with Jeanne Calment, then age 90. He would pay her \$500 each month until her death in order to secure ownership of her apartment in Arles, France. This is (or was) a common practice in France, benefitting both buyers and seniors on a fixed income.

Unfortunately for Raffray, Jeanne Calment (became) the world's oldest living person. Still alive at 122, (in fact) she outlived Raffray, who died in December 1995 at the age of 77. He paid \$184,000 for an apartment he never lived in. (If you think that's bad, wait for it -) according to the contract, Raffray's survivors (had) to continue payment until Mrs. Calment (died)." (Rowell, p. 250) Yes, uncertainty was costly in that situation! And so for that reason and others, we value certainty.

So what is your greatest fear? I've heard it said that some people fear having to speak in public more than death. But my observation is that most people fear death more than anything. We will go to extreme lengths and great costs to prolong our lives – heroic medical

procedures, the extreme costs for Homeland Security and concealed handgun permits being the more obvious signs of late. Why? That is an especially interesting question for those of us who profess to be Christian.

I don't have any proof, but my theory is that the fear and actions we are willing to take are because of the uncertainty associated with death. What really happens when one dies? Wouldn't we all like to know?

Well, that's what Easter is all about, isn't it? In the words of Br. Robert L'Esperance (SSJE), "Jesus knew that the only way to explode the myth of death and sacrifice was to undermine it by entering into it. To prove to us that we will live even when we seem to die." And I believe that if we could overcome our fear of death we could do a lot more in this world.

But doubt persists for all of us. Even those people we admire and view as holy, like Mother Teresa and Fr. Henri Nouwen, had doubts, but look what they accomplished in their lives in spite of the doubts they shared with others. Fr. Nouwen even left us with a special quote to help us deal with our fear of death: "Have the courage to trust that you will not fall into an abyss of nothingness, but into the embrace of God whose love can heal your wounds." Isn't that wonderful?

Doubt also can be good. First, it can cause us to seek spirituality through reading of God's word and prayer, through more soul searching, and through challenging our certainties – like death and taxes, for example. After all, the lack of doubt can have detrimental effects. As the Rev Timothy Warren reminds us: "Faith based on absolute certainty leads to fanaticism, but faith tempered with doubt is mature and stable." We don't have to look far today to see the relationship between religious certainty and fanaticism, and let me add quickly in many different religions.

The contemporary theologian Paul Tillich, contends that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of it. Wanting proof, like Thomas, isn't bad, it's natural. But we do need to have a modicum of faith, and that's why the author of John wrote the gospel we heard today – "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."

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.