

[1st reading: Joshua 1:1-9]

[Psalm: Psalm 119:129-136]

[2nd reading: James 1:12-18]

[Gospel: John 20:19-31]

[Liturgical date: Pentecost 12C]

[Location: USNA]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Personally, I find the opportunity to be in this pulpit today to be a tremendous blessing. Over the past little over six weeks I have had the privilege of serving as the Plebe Parent Contact on behalf of the Chaplain Center. I feel that this has provided a certain kinship between us that I have really enjoyed. Over these weeks I have had enjoyed quite a few conversations with you our families where I have prayed for you and I have prayed with you. I have struggled with you and I have struggled for you. And, I have even laughed with you on occasion.

About 6 ½ weeks ago you dropped off your sons and your daughters here at the Naval Academy and entrusted them into the care of the US Navy. That was a day that was filled with many emotions: joy, excitement, sadness, tears, fear, and laughter. That day, the question that I am sure was at the top of almost all your lists was, “Am I doing the right thing; sending my son or my daughter to the US Naval Academy? I am just not sure. I am not sure they are ready. I am not sure they can make it. They’re just too young. Do they have enough underwear?”

That same sentiment is one that I now have a much better understanding of than I previously did. You see, just a few days before the Naval Academy’s I-Day, my family and I experienced our own sort of I-Day. This year, our daughter, Maggie Rose, headed off for summer camp for the first time ever. Preparing for it was tremendously exciting, and we each headed into it very enthusiastically eagerly preparing. We packed, and double packed and even made sure she had enough underwear. Then the fateful time finally came to say “good bye.” I helped her carry her bags down to her cabin and carefully placed them on her bunk. I met her counselor, McKenzie, who would be with her the whole time; an incredible young lady. I then pulled Maggie Rose aside for a moment just to tell her good bye, tell her how much I love her, and send her forth with a blessing. Then, the emotions of the whole thing finally hit me in an overwhelming way. “Am I doing the right thing? Is she ready? Will she be able to make it?” Then, the water works began. Maggie Rose turned and looked at me, and she too began to tear up. Then, she got very frustrated, put her hands firmly on her hips, stomped her foot, and let out an exasperated, “Daaad!!!” At that point, my lovely wife stepped outside to see what was taking so long, and what all the commotion was about. Maggie Rose did not even bat an eye. She turned, looked at my wife and pointed at me saying, “He started it.” With no further fanfare, Maggie Rose walked immediately into her cabin, did not look back, but waved over her shoulder with a quick, “bye.”

It was at that point, all my doubts and fears quickly subsided. All concerns were washed away. Maggie Rose would be just fine, and of that I had no doubt. It was at that moment that a prayer we pray each week was resoundingly answered, "If I am inclined to doubt, steady my faith." Our Lord, through the determined confidence of an eight year old little girl, sent a very clear answer to my prayer.

The truth is doubting, being tempted, and missing the mark of God's intentions in our lives are all quite normal parts of being human. On the other hand, steadying my faith, making me strong to resist temptation, and giving me courage to try again are all normal parts of what God does for us. The thing is we are not required to remain in a status of doubt. We are not required to continue to struggle with temptation. We are not required to miss the mark of the high calling in our lives of God's intentions over and over again.

Our Gospel reading for today, John 20:19-31, is one of those very encouraging texts to me. It is normally read on that first Sunday after Easter each year. It is through this text that Thomas gets a very bad rap and is thereafter referred to as "Doubting Thomas." But really, you doubt one time and you are forever marked; just doesn't seem all that fair. Now, although Thomas figures very prominently in this text, however, I am really not so sure that he is the point. I think this is one of those occasions that we could take a cue from the Carly Simon song, "You're so vain, I bet you think this [sermon's] about you."

This Gospel reading, the Midshipman's Prayer, and even this sermon are really much more about God than they are about us. The reading, the prayer, and this sermon all freely acknowledge, "Of course I doubt, of course I am tempted, of course I miss the mark – that is the whole point." This prayer could probably be even more appropriately prayed not "If I doubt," but instead, "When I doubt." It is really not a matter of IF, it is much more a matter of WHEN because I certainly have and I certainly will again. Thomas was simply bold enough to actually admit it.

Thomas effectively and openly confessed, "I am really having a hard time believing all this stuff. This is a lot to absorb. I want to believe, but this is very hard. I need more, I need help to believe." And, Jesus answered that prayer in a simple and straight forward manner.

"Thomas, do you need more to believe? Well, I have more. Place your fingers here, does that help? Place your hands here. Do you need more, because I will certainly give you more?" Even our ability to believe is a gift from God. So, when I doubt Lord, and I certainly will doubt, steady my faith.

So, let's turn this around some, since this really is much more about God than it is about you and me. When I doubt, when I face temptation, when I miss the mark – how does God answer this prayer? I am completely confident that God does.

Take a look, a good hard look at our own lives. Not those grand, big neon sign moments, but the simple and quiet moments. Elijah, the prophet from the Old Testament went to meet God on a mountain top. Elijah expected to meet God in the mighty wind, but did not find God there. Then he expected to meet God in the roaring fire, but did not meet God there. Then he expected to meet God in the tremendous earthquake, but did not meet God there. Instead, Elijah came into the presence of God in the stillness and the quietness. Elijah met God in the still small voice.

We too meet God in the simple, the still and the quiet as well. We meet God and hear his reply for instance in the God-given confidence and strength of an eight year old girl. We meet God in the compassion and love of a phenomenal wife of 22 years. But, even more so, we meet God at the table, in the font and in the word.

At the table we are reminded, "This is my body," and "This is my blood," experienced in simple and ordinary bread and wine; not extravagant, but simple. Yet, in this simple bread and simple wine is the true embodiment of our Lord, broken and shed for us – for the forgiveness of our sins.

At the font a sinner is cleansed and welcomed to the family of God. Here they are bathed in the simple, ordinary waters of baptism and connected to God's holy and abiding word and promise. It is in this simple bath that salvation is extended – to you.

The opening to the Gospel of John we read, "In the beginning was the Word...and God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us," as a common Jewish child born of very common parents. Yet this same word came to redeem us through his sacrifice on a cruel Roman cross as a common criminal. Through this Word we have life, and this is the same Word that we proclaim today.

Throughout the millennia, in many and various ways, people have prayed this same prayer to steady my faith, to make me strong to resist, and to give me the courage to try again. Throughout the millennia God has also answered those prayers, and continues to answer them; in very unexpected ways. In this he extends his overwhelming love, and grace, and forgiveness, and redemption to all of us.

So now, for you nearly seven weeks into this adventure, how has God answered your prayer? How has God heard and answered your plea to steady my faith? Certainly some doubts may have lingered. No doubt that you still face the occasional temptation. I am quite positive that some of the objectives that may have been set have been missed. All of that is OK, because we are still human and God is still God. But, continue to pray, AND God will continue to answer those prayers. This really is, after all, much more about God than it ever will be about you and me.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think back across the moments of your life that you have experienced the greatest doubt, fear, anxiety, etc. What helped resolve that fear and doubt, and how can you now see the hand of God at work in helping to relieve your fears?
2. Thomas has gained the infamous moniker of “Doubting Thomas” for having the courage to actually state that he needed help to believe. Each of us, no doubt, has cried out in one way or another to God in a similar way to help strengthen our faith. How have you been allowed to “place your fingers in the wounds” as it were to help strengthen your faith?
3. When you stop looking for the big neon sign ways that God answers your prayers, you begin to see the small and simple ways that God was there answering that prayer all along. How has God done that for you?
4. Really none of us have accomplished truly meaningful things in our lives without mistake. Our marriages and raising our children for the vast majority of us would comprise those things in our lives that are the most meaningful, and also those things in our lives that represent the largest number of mistakes. How has God filled you with his Spirit to give you the courage to try again when you have missed the mark in those areas of your life that are the most meaningful?