

“Thomas”

Sunday, April 23, 2017

2nd Sunday of Easter

#1 in series of 3: *“Where Doubt Leads”*

 **John 20:19-31 (NRSV)**

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

Jesus and Thomas

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

So the other disciples told him, “*We have seen the Lord.*”

But he said to them, “*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.*”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “*Peace be with you.*”

Then he said to Thomas, “*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*”

Thomas answered him, “*My Lord and my God!*”

Jesus said to him, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

The Purpose of This Book

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

This maybe one of the more familiar stories from the Bible; preachers love to bring this one out every year to point out how easy it can be to doubt Jesus, even for the strongest disciple.

Personally, I think we may have given Thomas a bum rap over the years.

We like to point out that he refused to believe unless he got to see for himself.

The thing is, the other disciples were no better than Thomas.

They had run away from the scene on Calvary; now they are hiding behind locked doors, “*for fear of the Jews.*”

They were skeptical of the reports that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Even when Jesus appears in their midst, he shows them his wounds...*then* they rejoiced and believed.

Sounds to me like there was plenty of doubt to go around.

That is the important message for me from this passage today; everyone has doubts and God is big enough to handle them.

Let us pray...Lord, we come to your word this morning with our own questions and maybe even some doubt. Give us strength to hear your truth and courage to overcome our weakness. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

We have always heard “**doubting**” **Thomas** and assumed that’s what the Bible says...**It is not.**

The **Greek word** used in the text is “*apistos*,” which means “*unbelieving.*”

So, this is **not a story about doubt** as if Thomas thinks his friends are pulling his leg.

This **is a story about** Thomas’ **relationship** with Jesus...a relationship **shattered** by the crucifixion.

In John’s gospel, “*believing*” is the same thing as saying, “*I abide in you and you abide in me.*”

Believing isn’t about reciting a creed; it’s about a **close personal relationship** with Jesus.

Second, nowhere else in the gospel is Thomas portrayed as someone weak of faith...

Remember the story in Chapter 11, when Jesus declares his intention to return from Galilee to Judea where he will face certain death...

The disciples were afraid and urged Jesus to reconsider...

It was **Thomas** who said: “*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*”

This doesn't sound like a man who would then come to doubt his faith in Jesus Christ.

Maybe a better way of looking at it is to think of **Thomas** as a **realist**...

Kind of like someone with a terminal disease, who has accepted their fate, might react to reports of some new miracle cure...

Tom has a healthy bit of skepticism.

Finally, is Thomas asking for anything the other disciples haven't already received?

Think about it...Jesus appeared to the other disciples behind locked doors the week before...Thomas just happened to be absent.

We don't know why he wasn't there...

He may have had a legitimate reason...

Sick friend, kid's soccer practice, dinner with Mom...Who knows?

The point is, all the other disciples saw Jesus, saw his wounds, and then they believed.

All Thomas wants is the same thing they've already gotten.

So why has the Church been so hard on Thomas for 2,000 years?

Perhaps we have misunderstood the nature of faith itself...

Do we assume that the **more faith** we have the **fewer questions** we will ask?

I don't think this is the correct viewpoint.

The Bible offers us a different picture of faith.

Scripture shows us that **faith** and **doubt** are actually **intertwined** more than we realize...

Faith, after all, **is not** knowledge or certainty...

Paul told the Hebrews that faith:

*“is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.”*

(Hebrews 11:1)

I believe that the more we learn about our relationship with God,
the more we **want** to know...

In other words, the more we know the more **questions** we have.

This is not doubt or a lack of faith; it is love and a desire to grow closer to God.

Questions are not bad things.

I think the great lesson of this story comes out of Jesus' words at the end of the scene...

(V 29) Jesus said to Thomas, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

Jesus does not rebuke Thomas; he is no better or worse than **any** of the Apostles...

They **all** believed in the Resurrection only **after** they saw Jesus in the flesh.

We must not single Thomas out for unfair criticism – *they were all in the same boat.*

Jesus’ words in this scene are really a blessing for **us** and the generations of believers who have come to know Jesus never having seen him.

If we can re-visit the story today from this perspective, we can see that **Thomas** is **not** an **unfaithful** disciple; rather he is a **model disciple** – **a model we can emulate...**

Thomas shows us how to **become** a disciple...

He looks at it realistically and counts the cost...

When he decides to follow Jesus, his eyes are open and he knows what he is getting himself into...

He doesn’t merely believe, he boldly confesses: “*my Lord,*” – a title reserved for Caesar;

“and my God,” – the highest praise given to Jesus in the New Testament.

What we need to hear in this story is that **believing** in Jesus and becoming his disciple **is not about accepting someone else’s experience of the Risen Christ...**

It’s about each one of us having **our own** personal encounter with Christ – the Word made Flesh...God with us, dwelling among us...

This kind of encounter requires that we **ask questions** and find the right answers...

Doubt – *honest questioning* – is not the enemy of faith; it is an **essential ingredient of faith**...

Seeking to know the truth is not skepticism, it is an asset to vibrant faith...

We must be free to bring our questions and our insights into our Christian lives...

We must feel safe to voice our skepticism and our trust as we sit around the table...

This is the Christian conversation; it is the healthy dialogue that strengthens and deepens our faith – this is how we prepare ourselves to be faithful

disciples in a world that often doesn't believe anything it cannot see, touch, taste, or smell.

As time passes and we get further and further from the actual events described in the gospels it becomes easier for the skeptics to make their case.

We live in a culture where people still doubt the United States space program and the facts of space flight, moon landings, and space exploration.

We live in a world where some people can deny the Holocaust and find a sizable group of people who believe them.

Every day we hear new conspiracy theories, denials of global climate change, and people who ignore the facts in front of them.

Is it any wonder that so many people have a hard time believing that two thousand years ago a young carpenter from a little town in Palestine worked miracles, died on a cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to be ruler over everything?

It really doesn't surprise me in the least.

Just as those first disciples demanded and received their proof – the resurrected **Body of Christ**, our world is seeking the same kind of proof...

That's where we come in – We are the **Body of Christ**, commissioned by Jesus to go make disciples of all nations.

We put ourselves out there every day and let others put their fingers in our wounds and their hands in our sides.

In the midst of their pain and suffering and grief, we walk with our brothers and sisters in the world and show them that Christ is standing with them no matter what.

Imagine what a difference we can make when we help the skeptics begin to recognize Jesus without having seen him... **When all they can see is US – The Body of Christ.**

If we are to follow the splendid example of Thomas we must be prepared to boldly confess our faith as he did and give witness in a world that desperately wants and needs something in which to have faith.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**