

Faithful Doubt

John 20:19-31

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." 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." 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.

Today we read the story of the Doubting Thomas. It almost makes him sound like a medieval European monarch, doesn't it? Thomas the Doubter? It made me wonder if there were other famous Thomas' out there. There's Thomas the Rhymer, a 13th century Scottish balladeer, Thomas the Younger, archbishop of York, Thomas the Presbyter, a 7th century priest and author.

Apart from Joe the Plumber, rarely in our modern society do we hand out monikers the way royals did in medieval Europe. Whether someone was known as the Great, the Terrible, or the Lionhearted, you knew a lot about a person based on their popular name. Of course, one wrong move, and you might be stuck with a name that wasn't really you. Nicknames have a way of sticking with you – even if they're based solely on a one-time event.

And that's what happens to Thomas this morning. For this one story that we read this morning, he has forever been known as Doubting Thomas. Apart from being mentioned briefly in the list of the twelve disciples Jesus called, Thomas appears in three separate stories. The first time we really get to meet Thomas is when Jesus goes to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus receives word from Lazarus' sisters that he is fatally ill. Jesus doesn't respond right away, which is probably fine with most of the disciples. Bethany was only about two miles from

Jerusalem – and the people in Jerusalem were already riled up against Jesus. So a few days later, when Jesus announces that now he's ready to go to Bethany, the disciples try to talk him out of it. They remind him that the last time he was in the area, people tried to stone him. But then Thomas speaks up. He says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." In this story, we have Thomas the Brave or perhaps Thomas the Supporter.

The second time Thomas is featured is when Jesus is trying to give the disciples a lesson about what will happen after his death. Jesus says, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." This was not a question. Jesus didn't ask if they knew the way; he told them they already knew.

Do you wonder if the disciples ever got tired of not understanding Jesus? Of asking him to explain himself? The biggest reason I struggled with math in high school was that I didn't want to look dumb. In algebra, I was with a group of students who had taken pre-algebra. I hadn't. So I had to ask a lot of questions to figure out what we were doing. But especially in 8th grade, no one likes to look stupid in front of their peers. I could feel my face turn red and warm with embarrassment every time I raised my hand to ask a question. Which was several times a day. Eventually I stopped asking questions – which was the root of my problems with math for the next four years, until I finally got brave enough to start asking questions again.

Eleven of those disciples were like me. They were embarrassed that they didn't understand the parables. They were tired of always asking Jesus questions. Enter our friend Thomas the Brave, who was the one who was willing to speak up. Jesus had told them they knew the way to the place he was going. Thomas admitted, "Lord, we do not know where you are

going. How can we know the way?” Maybe Thomas is being brave here, or maybe he’s just willing to be Thomas the Humble and Honest.

It’s not until the third appearance of Thomas that we get today’s story, the one that hangs Thomas with the nickname of Doubter. Now let’s be fair to Thomas here. When Jesus first appears to the disciples, for some reason, Thomas isn’t with them. Maybe he had to go find food, or maybe he was going stir crazy hiding behind locked doors. But Thomas misses out on that first appearance by Jesus. And if you were listening closely, you noticed that when Jesus appears, he specifically shows the other ten disciples the wounds in his hands and side. So the other disciples didn’t have any more faith than Thomas – they just happened to be in the right place at the right time. But Thomas wasn’t. So he declares that unless he, too, can see and touch Jesus, he isn’t ready to believe. And for this, Thomas is called the Doubter.

This overview of Thomas should remind us that there is more to a person than a convenient “sound bite” of an experience. We have images of Thomas as The Brave, The Humble and Honest, and The Doubter. Why should one event define the life of Thomas any more than another? The truth is, it shouldn’t. And we all know that, but we still allow single moments to be definitive – both as we label others and as we judge ourselves. People are complicated, multi-faceted creatures. Whenever we place a label on someone, we have oversimplified the very nature of who they are.

We like labels, even when we know they’re inadequate and diminishing. We like them, because they make our lives easier. To say we live in the Information Age is really an understatement. We live in an age of multi-tasking, multi-media, information overload. We need to label people and events in order to keep processing information fast enough to function. And so rather than getting to know individuals personally, we label them. Progressive. Conservative.

Fanatic. Republican. Democrat. And while these labels help us to process the information that comes flying at us, it comes at a price. It comes at the price of seeing people as individuals, as children of God, each with their own unique personality made up of good, bad and quirky traits. When we get to know someone, we realize that those labels may still apply, but that they are wholly inadequate to describe the whole of a person.

At Annual Conference one year, I sat at a table with a woman, a pastor, I'd never met before. We had a lot of time to talk and share about what our churches were doing. We got bored at the same speakers and told each other stories and jokes. We shared a bowl of chocolate. By the middle of the third day, when we were voting on some significant and controversial issues, it became clear that she and I were completely opposed to one another on every. single. vote. We couldn't possibly have disagreed more. But because we had spent time getting to know one another, because we were now friends, we were invested in one another. I wanted to know why someone I liked so much could see things so differently than I did. Ultimately, we didn't change one another's minds, but we did have a really productive conversation. And we're still friends.

So what happens when we get to know Thomas a little better, when we move deeper than his label? First we notice that yes, Thomas doubted, but no more or less than anyone else. The other ten disciples got to see Jesus with their own eyes. They got to have their 'evidence.' And we like that too. A little proof would go a long way. But would proof of any single Bible story really make our faith any stronger? And if so, what does that say about our faith?

The truth is, we know that we're never really going to have empirical, tangible evidence of God. Faith, by definition, doesn't have evidence. And because we live in a culture that affirms the scientific method, we're always going to have a little, nagging doubt somewhere in the back of our minds. And what we can learn from Thomas is that that's okay. Thomas doesn't pretend

to be fully assured of the resurrection when in reality he doesn't believe. Thomas is authentic and honest about admitting where he has questions. And questions are good. They lead us through our doubt into a place of greater clarity.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, questioned his faith all the time. He, like Thomas and many of us, always wanted to be 100% sure that he was saved. But he had a hard time grasping and accepting the concept that faith was enough for salvation. He often wondered how he could continue preaching to others when he himself wasn't sure about his faith. He asked his friend Peter Böhler, a Moravian missionary, what he should do. Böhler replied, "Preach faith until you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." Sort of "fake it 'til you make it."

But I'm not sure that's really good advice. There are lots of elements of faith that we can disagree about. That we can argue about. But there's one thing I think people of all faiths can and should agree on, and that's that our faith should be authentic. We have to be honest about what we do and don't believe. It's no good to anyone to pretend to believe something. Faith, religion, spirituality... whatever you call it, it's about whatever has ultimate importance and significance in our lives. And that's too essential for lying, faking, or pretending. You'll never hear me saying that blind faith is the way to go.

So it turns out, we have to live our lives in the space between blind faith and scientific evidence. When we get real about our faith, most of us will have to admit to having doubts about something. Doubt makes us ask questions, and the process of looking for answers is our spiritual journey. It takes bravery, humility and honesty to admit that we have doubt. But when we do, we like Thomas, can discover a new level of depth to our faith. Amen and amen.

Place a bag of lollipops in front of the children. Hold up a red lollipop and ask them to tell you how they know it is red. Because they can see it. Hand each child a lollipop, and have them close their eyes. Ask them to tell you how they know it is round without opening their eyes. Because they can feel it. Have the children open the lollipops, and ask them to tell you how they know it is sweet. Because they can taste it. Then ask them if we can know something without seeing it, feeling it, or tasting it. Tell them the story of Thomas, and how he wanted to see and touch Jesus after he had been raised from the dead. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29). There are some things that we cannot see, like the goodness of God, or the love of our parents, or the concern of our friends. But we can always believe in this goodness and love and concern, even if we cannot touch it or taste it — we can believe in these things because they have been true in the past, and they will be true in the future. The best things in life cannot be seen or held on to, but if we believe in them we will not be disappointed. Goodness and love and concern are even better than lollipops, because they can last forever.
