

*Sermon:* “Room for Doubt?”

There are many characters in the Bible whose names are embellished by adjectives – but have you noticed that most of them are pretty positive, even if the person in question has made some bad life choices? There is the Prodigal Son, who leaves home and squanders his inheritance even while his father is still alive. There is Mary Magdalene who, though portrayed by many as a woman of ill-repute (unfairly, I might add) is known simply by the town she comes from, Magdala, as is Joseph of Arimathea. There are characters who are known by their relationships – James, the brother of Jesus, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Some are known by their occupation like John the Baptist. Even King Herod who ordered the death of all the infant boys after the birth of Jesus is known as Herod the Great!

But poor Thomas! He misses one meeting of the disciples and is tagged with the nickname “Doubting Thomas” forever. It really seems unfair. After all, Thomas only asked for the same evidence that the others had already received. They had seen Jesus in person – had seen his wounds, had heard his voice. Of course, they were convinced that he had risen from the dead. However, if we think back just a few days, weren’t these the same men who didn’t believe the women when they returned from the empty tomb with the same news? It took a visit from Christ himself to open their eyes to the truth and yet none of them were labeled as doubters.

Did Thomas doubt that Jesus had risen – or did he doubt the word of his friends?

Most of you know that I come from a career of teaching. And one of my favourite things to teach was critical thinking. When you read something, I'd tell my students, don't just stop at what's written on the page, look for what isn't there. What information is missing? When I read this story in the book of John, I wonder... why wasn't Thomas there when Jesus appeared the first time? All the others were hiding in a locked room in fear of the temple authorities, afraid they might meet with the same fate as Jesus if they were found. Where was Thomas? Shouldn't he have been just as afraid as the rest? Shouldn't he have been hiding with them? He obviously knew where they were. What was he up to? Why doesn't anyone ask him where he's been?

What do we know about Thomas apart from this story? He's only mentioned two other times in the book of John - but I think these two occurrences can give us a bit of insight into the man. In chapter 11, for example, news comes to Jesus that his good friend, Lazarus, has died. Jesus wants to go back to Judea but the disciples beg him not to go because the authorities there are out to kill him. Thomas is the only one who seems willing to follow Jesus. "Let's go!" he says, "Let's go and die with him." Doubting Thomas? Sounds more like Loyal Thomas to me... He certainly sounds like a man of action!

In chapter 14, the story of the night in the upper room, Jesus tells his disciples

*“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and 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.”*

It seems a very cryptic message to me, but does anyone ask for clarification? Just Thomas. He says,

*“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”*

My bet is that the others were just as confused as Thomas but not willing to show Jesus that they didn’t understand. Doubting Thomas? Or is this a Thomas who is willing to take the risk of looking foolish to really learn and understand?

So, if we know that Thomas is a loyal, courageous follower of Jesus, and we know that he is willing to take risks to get this whole way of living right... what can we imagine he was up to while the others were locked in that room?

I can picture him out looking for Jesus. It makes sense to me that, having been told by the women that Jesus is alive, Thomas would want to find him! Somehow, I don’t think he’d be happy locked away in secret knowing that Jesus might be out there somewhere. I think he would want to find him, to help him, perhaps, and certainly to take a stand beside him once again.

When I think of Thomas this way and then go back to today's story, a whole new perspective comes to view. Imagine having been out looking for Jesus with no luck only to come to this hideout and hear from your friends that the man himself has been to visit – and you missed it! I think I'd feel pretty frustrated and disappointed. I think I might have trouble believing these guys when I'd been all over and found no trace of Jesus. "Sure he's been here! I'll believe it when I see it!" sounds like a pretty natural response to me. After all, if Jesus has been here, why are they all still locked in this room? Why aren't they with him? Why aren't they out there doing something? Why isn't Jesus still here with them? Thomas would want to believe it to be true but realistically it wasn't making a lot of sense anymore.

Thomas impresses me, yet again. He doesn't stomp out of the room. He stays. He has missed out on the excitement of resurrection that the others claim to have witnessed – but he stays with them. It seems that he is still open to the possibility. He still wants to believe that it's true. He wants to be part of this community of believers. He hangs in there! Doubting Thomas? Or Hopeful Thomas? Maybe Open-minded Thomas!

John tells us that Jesus makes another appearance a week later – this time with Thomas present. A week! That is a long time for Thomas to wait for some indication that all this is true. A whole week locked in a room with his friends, trying to understand, to make sense of the last few weeks, of the last few *years*... what did it all mean? What happens now?

And finally, Jesus appears to Thomas as well – not just to him in a solitary moment but to Thomas in community with his friends, his colleagues, the ones who have become his family.

Notice that Jesus doesn't come into the room all blustery telling Thomas, "You want proof, Buster? Well, here's your proof! Go ahead put your fingers in my wounds, stick your hand in my side! There, is that good enough for you?"

No, his first words are, "Peace be with you." He makes the offer, certainly, for Thomas to touch him and lay aside his doubts – but we don't hear that Thomas needs to do so. Thomas' immediate response is "My Lord and my God!" ...

A heartfelt acknowledgement of the significance of what is happening.

John tells us that the others rejoiced when they saw the Lord. I'm sure they did! I can imagine them saying, "Thank goodness you are ok!" I am struck by the fact that, even though these friends of Thomas had seen Jesus with their own eyes and given reassurances and a commission to get out there... one week later here they were, still locked up in that room. It seems that they, just like Thomas needed time and deep conversation to fully grasp what had happened, to make sense of this fantastical idea that the man they watched die could still be alive. That one visit, it seems, wasn't enough to dispel their doubts.

Thomas' reaction was very different. Faced with the appearance of a fully alive Jesus in front of him, Thomas, I think, was the first one to understand. He didn't need to reach out in response to Jesus' invitation to touch his wounds; he immediately exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" This is not relief or even astonishment – this is awe in the realization that what he most hoped for was true... that the crucifixion of Jesus wasn't the end of all they had believed in ... that brute power, even to the point of death, did not have the last word... and more than this... that God is present among them.

Thomas was the first one to really get it – The first one to understand what Jesus had been trying to teach them all along. The one who started with doubt and questions was the one who was able to give the greatest testimony of faith. "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas had questions – perhaps we might even call them doubts. Thomas wanted to be certain. As much as he wanted to believe it was true, he needed to be sure.

I think Thomas sounds a lot like most of us, actually. Especially today, I think we can all relate to Thomas. Today we are bombarded by "facts" from every direction and we waver between accepting every sensational internet posting that matches what we want to be true – and crying, "Fake news!" or "That picture is photo-shopped!" when it seems too fantastical or when it challenges our world view.

One commentator I read hit it on the head, I think, when he remarked that "today's culture is caught between blind faith and blind doubt".

In our Lectionary Study this week, we talked a lot about this feeling of doubt and what it means to our faith. Pastor Victor put forth the idea that there is a big difference between “honest doubt”, when your mind is open to new ways of seeing, and “cynical doubt”, with your mind made up and closed to any other considerations – the kind of doubt I imagine that commentator meant when he talked about “blind doubt”.

So, perhaps Thomas is a reflection of you and me. Thomas had doubts – and doubts are our protection against being scammed. If it sounds too good to be true...

But Thomas wasn't afraid to ask questions. He wasn't afraid to dig deeper. And you know what else I find wonderful about this story? No one gives him a hard time for asking those questions, for having those doubts. A week later, Thomas is still there with them. They are still a community.

When Thomas first appears in today's reading, the author notes that Thomas was also called “the twin”. Whose twin? Could he be our twin?

And is this such a bad thing? Yes, Thomas had doubts and questions. I daresay most of us do. But those doubts and questions didn't weaken his faith. If anything, they enabled him to really deepen it. He wasn't afraid of those doubts and questions. He used them to search for truth and meaning. They were an essential part of his faith. And it seems that he was in a community that allowed him to ask those questions, to search for what

he needed. How much stronger is Thomas' faith, how much more sure can he be, when he has put that faith to the test of realism, of what he knows to be true!

When I look at it this way, I think I would be proud to call Thomas my twin. I hope I could live up to his standard.

And think about that little community – those twelve men hidden away behind locked doors. Jesus had already come to them. They knew for certain that death had not taken him away. He stood there among them. He told them that he was sending them out. He breathed the Spirit into them and gave them the power to forgive sins...

And a whole week later, they were still hiding in that room.

It makes me wonder if they needed to explore the doubts and questions just as much as Thomas did. It makes me wonder how that little community might have been strengthened by Thomas' struggle to understand, his persistence to keep searching until it all became clear. How much stronger must that community have been for having journeyed with Thomas! This next encounter with Jesus was the one that really transformed them. Certainly, John's next part of the story has them out of that locked room - out in the open air casting their nets...

So, what about us?



We live in a world that constantly demands proof. We demand proof – and yet are we afraid to doubt, to question, when it comes to our faith?

Nowhere in this story – or any other I can think of – does Jesus say to Thomas or the others, “Don’t doubt!” His consistent message is, “Peace be with you!” Even the angels keep telling everyone they encounter, “Do not fear!”

Fear of making a mistake... fear of looking foolish... fear of getting hurt... fear of disappointing Jesus?

Another nugget from our Lectionary Study this week was this quote from Frederick Buechener (thanks again, Victor!) “if you don't have doubts you're either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants-in-the-pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving.”

(Frederick Buechener, [Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC](#))

Jesus can handle our questions and our doubts. Jesus wants us to do more than shout “Hallelujah!” behind the closed doors of the sanctuary. An encounter with the risen Christ should be something that transforms us, something that sends us out into the world to be his hands and feet – because resurrection is a big deal! It isn’t just something that happened to Jesus, it should be something that changes us too. And I think that kind of transformation takes work – the kind of work that involves dealing with questions and doubts head on - the kind of work that involves probing and searching –

so that what we believe is more than lip service on Sunday morning... so that what we believe makes a difference in how we live.

At the end of this passage, Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Is this a rebuke to a man with doubts?

Or is it an acknowledgement to someone who understands that if faith is hard work for the twelve who were closest to him – even with the evidence right in front of them - then how much harder it will be for those of us who don't have that advantage – and blessings for us all.

I have a lot of time for this Thomas. I think he understands that we can use our doubts and questions to lock ourselves up securely or we can use them as tools to build our beliefs and open ourselves to the resurrection experience.

I'm not sure what adjective would be best to describe him... Maybe "Doubting Thomas" is the best one after all.

Thanks be to God. Amen