

Faith and Doubt Go Hand in Hand **John 20: 19 – 31**

(preached on April 7, 2024)

In our gospel passage for today, from the gospel of John, we find a person who is skeptical. According to Webster's New World Dictionary, someone who is skeptical is "not easily persuaded or convinced; doubting, questioning." Most of us are skeptical at one time or another. And there's nothing new about skepticism. I would guess that people have been skeptical at times, for as long as the human race has existed. Here, in our story from John, Thomas is skeptical. Thomas has some doubts. When he hears from the other disciples that they have seen Jesus, alive and risen from the grave, Thomas isn't buying it. He basically says, "I won't believe it till I see it."

Over the centuries since John wrote his gospel, Thomas has gotten a lot of bad press. Church tradition has given him the name "Doubting Thomas," because he wanted to see for himself. It's true that Thomas had some doubts. Before he would believe, he wanted to see and touch for himself the miraculous new resurrection body of Jesus.

But when you think about it, it doesn't seem fair that Thomas has been given this negative nickname. New Hampshire pastor Mark Pearson points out that we don't give Peter such a bad rap. Remember how, on the night Jesus was crucified, Peter denied knowing him three times? But we don't call Peter "Denying Peter." And in the Hebrew Scriptures, the great King David had an extramarital affair. He was so smitten with the beautiful Bathsheba that he had her husband killed, but we don't call him "Adulterous and Murderous David." But Thomas has often been called "Doubting Thomas."

Could we look at Thomas a little differently? Could we look at Thomas in a more positive light? Could we, maybe, actually be grateful to him? Think about it. For one thing, in the gospels Thomas raises the questions that others might be thinking but don't say out loud. Thomas asks the tough questions that nobody else has the courage to ask. For example, he asks a tough question on the night before the crucifixion, when Jesus is talking with his disciples in the upper room. Jesus has been speaking of his impending death, and offering the disciples the hope that he will be with them always. Still today, his words are often read at funerals. He says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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 you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14: 1 – 4).

As Jesus offers these hopeful, soothing words, we can picture the other disciples listening, nodding politely, maybe mumbling, "Oh yes, of course, Lord. We know where you're going." But Thomas isn't about to be a yes man. He blurts out, "Actually, Master, we have no idea where you're going" (John 14: 5). I don't think Thomas means any disrespect here. He just wants more information (Upper Room *Disciplines*, 2012). So he asks questions.

In his gospel, John doesn't tell us why Thomas wasn't with the other disciples on that night after the resurrection when Jesus first appeared to them. He doesn't tell us why, when the risen Jesus first came to them, breathing peace upon them, Thomas wasn't there. Maybe that night Thomas didn't want to be with anyone. Possibly, on that first night after the crucifixion, he was so overcome with grief that he went off to be alone.

Or maybe he had volunteered to go out and buy food for the group. After the crucifixion, the streets would have been dangerous for the disciples. As followers of Jesus, they would have been wanted by the authorities. Roman soldiers would have been out looking for them, hoping to arrest them and put an end to the Jesus movement once and for all.

Or maybe, while his fellow disciples were safe and sound behind locked doors, Thomas was out looking for their families and loved ones, to make sure they knew that he and the others were safe. We don't know where Thomas was that night, but we do know that when he and the disciples see Jesus a week later, Thomas wants to see Jesus, and touch Jesus, for himself. Thomas has questions. Thomas wants to make sure that the figure who appeared to them after the crucifixion, shining with new life, really is his Lord.

I think a lot of people can relate to Thomas' questions. When it comes to faith, people have a wide range of attitudes. Some people are able to believe without asking a lot of questions, but many of us are more like Thomas: raising questions, wondering, doubting.

One of my mentors in ministry, the Rev. Hal Fohlin, puts it this way: "Some people say they have no doubts at all. They believe what they have been told by their parents and the church without question. They see the Bible and theology literally, word for word, just exactly as it is stated." They are the folks driving around in cars with bumper sticker that say, "The Bible said it. I believe it. That settles it."

Fohlin goes on, "Others have a different attitude toward faith. They question everything. They examine, probe, and attack every statement and every belief." Fohlin says that both groups tend to become hardened and defensive, each in their own way. "The first group tends to become hardened and defensive in their optimism. The second group tends to become hardened and defensive in their pessimism."

But most of us, most of the time, are somewhere between these two extremes. And our views will probably change over time. If we honestly embark on a journey of faith, we can never be sure where it's going to take us. If faith, for us, is truly alive and moving, then we'll see that, like anything else that is alive, our faith has to grow and to evolve. As soon as we decide really to think about what we believe, we'll feel some uncertainty. As soon as we explore our feelings about faith, we'll experience some doubt, because, in our journey of faith, faith and doubt go hand in hand.

Pastor Frederick Buechner has a different and more colorful way of describing the interplay between faith and doubt. He says, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving." An honest faith doesn't shut out doubts. An honest faith is on speaking terms with doubt.

Thomas wants to see, and touch, for himself. He wants to make sure that the person standing before him, shining with new life, really is his Lord. Jesus doesn't have a problem with Thomas' doubts. When he sees Thomas, he says, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side." Go ahead, Thomas. Touch and feel and know that it is really me.

Then Thomas, with his hands on Jesus' wounds, is able to exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" Then and there Thomas feels for himself the loving touch of Christ. He feels the compassion and acceptance, the assurance that Jesus loves him just as he is, doubts and all. Then and there he's able to declare that Jesus is not only his Lord, but also his God, the divine Master he will worship and adore. Then, from a man who was honest about his doubts, comes the most profound statement of faith you'll find in any of the gospels. Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God."

If you and I are honest with ourselves about our faith, we know that we will have some doubts at times. If our faith is truly alive and moving, we'll see that, like anything that is alive, our faith has to grow and evolve. Along the way we'll have some doubts. But we can see from his encounter with Thomas that Jesus doesn't have a problem with our doubts. Honest doubt is not a threat to faith. Faith that is alive and growing goes hand in hand with doubt, as we grow in understanding. If we live with honest faith, by God's grace, we will grow more and more fully into the people God created us to be.

Rev. Elva Merry
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