

From Doubt to Faith

April 7, 2013

John 20:19-31

Don't you think it would be terrible to have a negative label associated with your name that you just couldn't shake? How often do you hear someone talk about Thomas the disciple, or how often do you think about Thomas without that other word - "Doubting?"

"Doubting Thomas;" poor ole doubting Thomas. The guy has caught grief for 2000 years and my guess is that he will catch grief for a long time to come.

To be honest, I feel for the guy. Our tradition has singled him out as having an inferior faith because he actually expressed his doubt in the resurrection. He made his reservations known out-loud. And because of that he has the dubious distinction of being the poster child for skepticism.

But you know what is even worse for ole Thomas is that most people know what a "Doubting Thomas" is even if they have never heard this biblical story. His name is simply synonymous with doubt. All you have to do is pick up a Webster's Dictionary and there it is. Actually, it is in two places: under "d" for doubt and under "t" for Thomas.

According to Webster the definition for a "doubting Thomas" is a habitually doubtful person. Habitually?! You know, we don't know a whole lot about Thomas, but the only time – the only time – we see his doubtful side is in this story. So, I think 'habitually' might be overstating the case just a little bit.

But in any case, we still are left with a man who appears to have a crack in his wall of faith through which a little doubt is oozing out. And can you really blame him? What he is asked to accept is fantastic. And keep in mind he is hearing about the resurrection second hand. The other disciples had the advantage of seeing Jesus in person a few days before.

So, for Thomas, not having had the encounter with the risen Lord, this tale being spun by the delirious disciples is a bit unbelievable. Even for us who have the benefit of knowing the end of the story, this seems unreal. I mean it is not every day that we hear about folks rising from the dead. In fact, I think it's pretty safe to say that it is an unusually rare event.

So, Thomas, having heard the news that the disciples saw Jesus alive, was understandably skeptical. Put yourself in Thomas' shoes for a minute. It's hard for us to do because we know the rest of the story. But try. Just like Thomas, pretend that you have never heard the story of Jesus' resurrection.

And after you've done that, pretend that one day, after having attended a funeral for a friend, someone comes up to you and says excitedly, "You'll never guess who I saw at Harris Teeter today. She looks great! Heck, to look at her, you'd never guess that she died last week."

Think how you would react to that. I think the first concern of most of us would be for this person's emotional well-being. And our second thought would likely be that whomever the person saw must obviously bear a striking resemblance to our deceased friend.

The idea that someone would be walking around after having died the previous week is so far beyond the realm of possibility that I doubt seriously that many if any of us would even entertain the thought of it. And yet, we somehow expect Thomas to accept this news in a matter-of-fact way; like this was no surprise at all.

Poor ole Thomas has become the scapegoat for the church which sometimes says that doubt is wrong; or that it is somehow less than faithful to say that we're struggling with a particular issue.

Some "church folks" want to give us the impression that we are not allowed to ask the hard questions without being labeled a cynic, or a skeptic, or a religious liberal.

Since when are questions bad? Since when is it wrong to admit that we don't understand everything? Since when is it wrong to ask God to clarify something? Read the account of Job, or the Psalms. Both are filled with uncertainties, complaints, and questions of God.

Even Jesus while hanging on the cross cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Thomas is just one in a long line of faithful people who have raised their voices to ask the hard yet faithful questions.

Folks, faith lies in conversation. Actually, faith is really what prompts the conversation. Faith is when we are willing to embrace the doubts, ask the questions, and face the answers. Faith is believing in something that is beyond our ability to comprehend, but that faith is not afraid to try.

I think this story of Thomas is a testimony to the difficulty of faith – how hard it is to believe. Faith takes work, because it puts us in uncomfortable places and begs us to ask tough questions. I also think this story validates our need for God's touch. It says that it is okay for us to ask questions of God and... to wish for a personal encounter.

There is nothing cut-and-dried about the Christian faith. As much as some people like to try, it cannot be reduced to a set of rules, where everything fits, where everything makes sense, where all we have to do is to connect the dots. That is the kind of thing the Pharisees tried to do. They tried to explain everything in a formula; to make all of life so that it could be answered by a set of rules.

And if it didn't fit within that set of rules they rejected it as heresy or blasphemy. And consequently, their hearts were closed to the renewing of Christ simply because he didn't meet the criteria. Their unwillingness to look "outside the box" as we say today blinded them to the miracle of Jesus Christ who stood in their presence.

God comes in places where we sometimes least expect it, showing us that “possibility” has nothing to do with our being able to explain it. Sometimes our faith asks us to look outside the box; to color outside the lines and to believe some things that the rest of the world says are ridiculous. Or... our faith may ask us to do things that the rest of the world says are folly.

But, as with Thomas, faith begins with an encounter. It has to begin with an encounter, because without one we are unable to believe. Without an encounter with God, the resurrection seems as silly as seeing Elvis in Krispy Kreme buying jelly donuts. It is ridiculous.

But an encounter with the risen Christ changes all of that. Suddenly, the absurd becomes a new reality, and rules which once governed our believing - and our dis-believing - are blurred. And even the lines between life and death, which once seemed so absolute, are crossed.

Make no mistake about it - this is a story of doubt, but it is also a story of God’s ability to change that doubt into faith – not erase the doubt, but overcome it with an irresistible encounter with the impossible. Faith is that crazy thing that allows us to believe when everything else says, “impossible.”

This story is important because when we can see the possible through our own cloudy, disbelieving eyes, we suddenly can see an entire world of possibility far beyond what skepticism would allow. God has overcome the grave, and now God even overcomes those things that lead to our spiritual death – things like disbelief, fear, hatred, and narrowness.

And even though this is a story of doubt, it is the miracle of faith that we are ultimately left with. Minds are opened, hearts swell with the words, “My Lord and my God!” All because of a personal touch and a vision of our Lord. Without it, we just continue to wallow around in our own doubt, or remain a hostage by the world’s rules that cling to the impossibilities.

I began this morning by sticking up for poor ole Thomas. And I think his reputation needs a little polishing. He really wasn’t such a bad guy. In fact, he was no different from the other disciples; he was just a week late!

The other disciples also needed a personal encounter with the risen Jesus **JUST AS MUCH AS THOMAS DID**. Read the story again for yourselves. I think you will see that all of them reacted with fear and disbelief at first.

Faith and understanding began only after Jesus made himself known personally to each of them. And isn’t it exactly the same for us. We remain solidly in our own skepticism until the Lord breaks through the locked doors of our hearts.

I have known a number of people who seemed to be absolutely convinced that they were the "best Christians" God ever made.

They just knew that they had all the right answers, that their theology was "the way," and you could even see them shake their heads or wince or frown if someone said something contrary to their beliefs. They couldn't even enjoy a lot of the things that God gave us to enjoy and appreciate in this life.

But, you know, I have to admit to you that I often wondered if those people had ever really and truly had an encounter with the living Lord. Because I'm convinced that once you do, rigid rules are replaced by an awareness of the incredible wideness in God's mercy. And the really miraculous news in all of this is that God searches and finds us even when we don't want to be found. Even when we lock ourselves away from the world; even when we try to keep out the good news, Jesus breaks through that door.

The stone door that barred the tomb couldn't restrain him. He had conquered death and he was going to make it known to his friends and to the world. And no flimsy wooden door could stop him from coming into the disciples' room.

And when they saw him they rejoiced. They cried out in faith. And for the rest of us as well, the Lord appears breathing his Spirit into our hearts literally blowing away that mountain of doubt.

We all need a personal encounter with the Lord before we can declare, "my Lord and my God." A second-hand Jesus just will never do. We need God to break into our locked hearts and to give us that encounter.

I think we have all been doubting Thomas's at some point in our lives. But it is into our doubting and searching hearts where Jesus breaks in and reveals himself to us.

God knows our need for a first-hand encounter. That is why God came to us in the person of Jesus -- took on flesh so that we could see him, touch him, hear him, and be touched by him.

And he died for all of us -- died on a cross, raised up for all to see. We have been given a vision of God's sacrificial love in the person of Jesus. And we are touched by God's Holy Spirit, who breaks through and breathes life into our faithless and doubting hearts, causing us to cry like Thomas, "my Lord and my God."

After the Lord breaks into our hearts and we have made that declaration there is a life that proceeds from that point.

God calls us out of our locked rooms into the world - not to beat people over the head verbally with our doctrines, but to show the world that Jesus Christ is real to us, real in a way that makes us authentic, genuine people.

Believing without seeing. Thomas doubted... yes. And yet, which of us can claim to throw the first stone at him. Which of us has never had the smallest bit of doubt?

Perhaps we have looked to the trouble of the world, the pain, the injustice, the senseless violence, and have thought, "How can a good God let bad things happen?" Perhaps we have been challenged by competing beliefs of many different religions.

Or perhaps we are just like Thomas, and struggle to believe the words of others, wishing we could have first hand knowledge for ourselves.

Luckily for Thomas and for us, Thomas is not left sitting there doubting. The text now turns to a wonderful message of grace. Jesus appears in the room with all 12 disciples, and he directly addresses Thomas.

Jesus knew he doubted. Jesus knew he had been excluded from the special revelation the night he appeared to the other eleven. Jesus even knew what that whole last week must have been like for Thomas.

Just ponder that for a moment... the only disciple left out. The only disciple with nothing but words to go by. The one disciple most like us today. And Thomas, the one left out, spent that entire week wrestling alone with his doubts.

Now, Jesus does not lecture him, chastise him, or discipline him for doubting, instead Jesus wished him peace, and in his mercy, gave Thomas what he needed to move beyond his doubt.

Like Thomas, there are times we will be challenged. We will doubt. The very best news of all is that God doesn't let us sit forever... arms crossed, ankles crossed, and brow furrowed. In our time of doubt we will search, examine, question, and we too can gain a stronger and deeper understanding of faith, of God, and of our relationship with him.

One week after Easter. One short week. In that crowded little room, door locked, sitting with the other 11... Where do you sit? Do you sit with Thomas, as one seeking? Do you sit with the 11, still excited and buzzing? Perhaps you sit on your own, neither excited nor doubting.

Wherever you sit today, I encourage you to look to Thomas not as a bad example to be avoided, but rather as our representative in that room, as ones who have other people's word and not a first hand experience. And Jesus stands before us inviting us to see the wounds and touch his side, so that we may know the truth, and stand again with Thomas to say "My Lord and my God."

There is a hymn that I haven't heard or even seen in print in a long time, but that we used to sing a lot. It begins, "I serve a risen Savior, he's in the world today. I know that he is living, whatever men may say"and the chorus ends with, "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart."

That's the key. We are called to show our faith for the sake of others, so that they not simply hear words, but so that they see Jesus Christ alive in our hearts and lives. The ways we love each other; not superficially but authentically, the ways we respond to those in need; the ways we are responsible with all God has entrusted to us will be visible evidence of Jesus' presence in our lives.

As will the way we respond to fellow Christians who are at different places in their faith journey. Others will come to faith, not by what we say, but by the way we live God's love.

Be a vision of Christ for someone today. Let's help someone have a first-hand encounter with the living Christ in the way we open our hearts to others. Amen.