

A Faithful Questioner

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John 20:19-29

Oh, how often I have heard that phrase – “Stop being such a doubting Thomas!” or “You’re just a doubting Thomas!” or some version of these. Most often when I have heard such a phrase used, it was used as a putdown of someone or even a means to influence and change someone’s behavior. After all, **who of us** wants to be known OR identified as a “doubting Thomas”.

Today we celebrate the 2nd Sunday of Easter on the liturgical calendar. The gospel lesson for this day comes from the 20th chapter of John beginning with the 19th verse. (read) These specific verses are actually a continuation of the first 18 verses of the same chapter. There are four distinct portions to these first 29 verses of John’s Gospel.

In verses 1- 10, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and is reported by John to have found it empty. She goes back to the gathered disciples to inform them. Peter and other disciples, all went back to the tomb with Mary Magdalene. The disciples indeed find the tomb empty. While they were observing the scene, Mary Magdalene stood outside weeping. She was the first disciple to which Jesus appeared. Later that evening, Jesus appeared to several of the disciples. Thomas was not present for this appearance. Of course the disciples who saw Jesus reported this to Thomas who is reported to have said those infamous words, “unless I see...unless I put my hand”. A week later, John tells us, Jesus appeared to the disciples including Thomas.

Now, remember, Thomas was invited by Jesus to “see” and to “put his hand”, but **HE DID NOT**. Even so, he has, I believe, been falsely isolated from the rest of the disciples and designated as the **ONE and only** “doubter”.

Chapter 20 involves a number of Jesus disciples. We are not told exactly the number who saw Jesus, but somehow Thomas has been singled out as a doubter. Jesus’ words to Thomas have been mistranslated as, “Stop your doubting, and believe!” A more accurate translation would be, “Don’t be unbelieving. Believe!” This may sound like a **SMALL** differentiation but it is important. The significance is that Jesus did not censor Thomas for the state he was in...grief, shock. Thomas asked for **nothing more** than what any of the other disciples had already experienced, and Jesus, understanding this, provided Thomas that opportunity.

Do you not think Thomas would be shocked and horrified to learn that some 2,000 years later we would be scrutinizing his reaction to the news of Jesus’ appearance to and among the disciples? After all, he simply questioned something which was very difficult to believe. Do we not think that people of Jesus’ time had their own version of, “if it

sounds too good to be true it probably is"? Wasn't Thomas justified in questioning the assertion that Jesus was alive and had appeared to other of the disciples? Are we too blinded by this long-standing characterization of Thomas to think that there might have been one or more of the other disciples who questioned whether Jesus really was alive?

This brings me to the points I would like to address today. As I pondered these verses, two thoughts came to me:

Belief vs. faith

Questioning

I have come to understand through study and discussion that belief and faith are two very different things. For many Christians, they probably are just different words which can be used interchangeably and mean the same thing. Belief is about believing the right things...the correct things. And many Christians understand that they **are** Christians **because** they **BELIEVE** the right things. Most often Christians are told that they are to **BELIEVE** certain doctrines like the Apostles Creed, and other doctrines outlined by church leaders 300 years after Jesus died. It is possible to "believe" what a congregation outlines you must believe, yet live a life that is less than Christ like. Faith, on the other hand, is **more** than an intellectual agreement with something. Belief is part of faith, but faith is more than belief. Faith is a deep seated assurance. You know that you know that you know.

Two weeks ago Todd and I went to lunch. As we talked about today's scripture, I shared a story with him. Several years ago, I went through a very deep, troubling personal experience. I was working through some issues associated with that experience with a therapist and in one session she asked a very pointed question, "Where is God in all this for you?" Without hesitation, I replied, "God has been with me as I have gone through this!" I participate in an on-line forum and someone shared, *"I have three people in my care who are in their late 50's and early 60's who were axed in the last couple of months. All believers, no whiners, all devastated. I don't mean a little hurt...I mean devastated. They are still functioning, volunteering at food banks, keeping busy, trusting God...But right now they feel like Joseph in the pit or prison-trapped. Their money is drying up, they have had medical emergencies, their cars have died, their spouses are working and ragged – exhausted. And they go to worship each week and leave feeling beat up by the "Prosperity, can't out give God, money oriented talk".*

Oswald Chambers said, "God will grind you to pumice that you might know God." You know that we know that is true and you know how hard it is to be in the grinder. You know that Joseph's time in prison, while it turned out for good it wasn't one ounce of fun."

So when it comes what to preach/teach...I am struck..."

A response from a very insightful person posted this as a response, "Do you remember me saying, worship is the place where we go to tell God if you never do another thing for me it has been enough? I think that sums up what I'm trying to say. **If we have to find**

assurances in the midst of tragedy it's too late. We should already have it and it should sustain us." To me, this talks of what faith should be.

Do not misunderstand what I am trying to say. I have had my share of questioning why certain circumstances were happening in my life, and of how I was going to make it through those challenges. **I HAVE... I DID...I WILL again.** And this brings me to my second thought and point for today. I believe to question our belief in light of our faith is not sinful. I believe true, authentic faith in Jesus means there is always more to learn, more to do as people of faith. We do NOT have all the answers and we are not yet fully what God wants us to become as followers of Jesus' way. Thank goodness, we are not the people we used to be, AND we are not yet the people we will become. Faith, as I understand it, is not set or static. Faith changes. I **DO NOT** believe exactly the same way or have the same faith as I did when I first was approved as clergy. **Thank God.**

I am on a path...a journey to God. I can point to very distinct times in my life when people came into my life **and PLANTED seeds** of faith within me which began to germinate and grow. I am so grateful for those seeds and nurturing of those seeds. Todd talked last week about a seed that was planted in him during an interview for a clergy position. This seed challenged him, he asked questions, he investigated and he was changed. From my perspective, Thomas' questioning was **not** a sign of weakness OR sinfulness. It was something that spurred him to explore, to find the answers he was looking for. It helped him to become.

It might help to know who Thomas became? According to tradition, Thomas went to India and shared his faith with people. The community of faith which he helped establish some 2,000 years ago has survived years of persecution as a minority faith. Even more amazing, the community he helped establish in India somehow managed to develop a worship life and liturgy WITHOUT ever having heard of the Bible. AND, imagine the surprise of the Portuguese missionaries who came to India in the 17th century and found the thriving Christian faith alive and well.

Rather than Thomas being belittle and demeaned, we should be awed by his faith and his walk as a follower of Christ. My prayer is that I may become the person God has created me to be, not just believing but walking in faith, unafraid to seek answers to my questions about that path I am on. And welcoming the planting of seeds as a part of my faith journey, and to be, like Thomas, a faithful questioner.

Amen.