

## **Second Sunday of Easter April 24 2022**

### **John 20:19-31**

Show of hands, how many of you have heard the story of Thomas before today? I know you've heard it from me! What is it that you have heard? I've heard this story for years and probably heard 20+ sermons on it, preached a few myself. He is called Doubting Thomas, but I wonder if he is less doubting, and more an expressing what we all need to have- a curiosity to explore a question deeply, to experience for ourselves the truth of something.

Let's take a closer look at the story in John. It is the day of the Resurrection, the first day of the week, a Sunday. Peter and the other, unnamed, disciple have been to and seen the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene has met and spoken to the risen Christ and has reported to the disciples that she has "seen the Lord". It's Easter.

On the evening of that day, we find the disciples shut up in the house because they feared arrest by the Jewish authorities that had come for Jesus. Into this huddle of fear, behind closed doors, Jesus appears. "Peace be with you", he says to the frightened and amazed disciples. He then shows them his hands and side. The disciples rejoice on seeing Jesus again. He then empowers them with the Spirit to go out into the world.

However, Thomas is not with the other disciples when this appearance by Jesus happens. The language used suggests that Thomas is not just out getting coffee, but rather that he isn't hanging with them anymore. That he has moved on to try and find what he will do next now that Jesus is dead. But the disciples find Thomas and tell him (echoing Mary Magdalene) that they have "seen the Lord",

Thomas says that without being able to see Jesus and touch his wounds himself he will not believe.

A week later, Sunday, the first day of the week, Jesus appears to the gathering of disciples, still behind closed doors, and this time Thomas is there. Jesus again greets them in peace and then offers to Thomas what he wants; to touch Jesus, to experience him first hand. Thomas needs nothing more than this encounter with Jesus, “My Lord and my God”! A clear statement of faith. Stronger than that of the other disciples when they first saw the risen Christ. An echo of Martha’s statement of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God just before he raised her brother Lazarus.

In looking at the whole story of the resurrection, I think Thomas has gotten a bum rap over all these years. He is really no different than the other disciples. They too had heard from a believer who had “seen the Lord”, Mary Magdelene, and they too refused to act on that report. It’s only when Jesus turns up in their lives, shows them his hands and side, that they believe. (Notice that each time this appearance of Jesus happens it is on the day of resurrection, the first day of the week, Sunday, and within the context of a gathering of believers? Sound familiar?). Also, notice that Jesus doesn’t berate Thomas for his reluctance. Rather, he immediately gives Thomas what he needs. “Here are my wounds, put your hand in my side.” I hear Jesus’ words as an encouragement, not an admonition, “Do not doubt, unbelieve, but believe!”

This story from scripture highlights what is often a fundamental misunderstanding of faith within our North American context. Because of the dominance of a particular brand of Christian belief, we have come to equate faith/belief with

unwavering acceptance. True faith means that no questions are asked, that no examination is necessary. That once we have the “true” interpretation of scripture we pack away our brains. Unfortunately, this has seeped over into our cultural and civic lives such that once we have accepted something as truth, we have no interest in exploring the possibility that what we believe to be so is not. That our views on the treatment of women, or minorities shouldn’t change, that people from rural areas are backwards, that our understanding of the history of our country can’t change.

But from the beginning, followers of the Creator of the Universe have asked questions of their God. “How long, O Lord, how long?” asks the Psalmist. Abram questions whether God’s promise of descendants still holds true. Job wonders why he is suffering so because he did everything right! Moses asks for God’s name.

Asking questions, pursuing answers, sticking our hands into the open wounds of Christ are a natural and healthy part of a living faith. After all, where would we be if Martin Luther hadn’t asked questions about his faith and diligently sought the answers? Questions are part of what helps our faith to grow (when we pursue the answers to those questions) and are a means of keeping us from becoming stagnant or inflexible in our faith.

Questions do for us what Thomas was asking for. They bring us a personal experience of God, one that we can see, touch, taste, smell for ourselves. One that we can get a handle on.

Questions are also a way to spiritual health. It can be compared to stretching your muscles. For muscles to get bigger and stronger in a healthy way, you need

to stretch. Stretching your muscles means that they will remain supple giving you full range of motion. This means that when you have something happen like a fall you are more likely to come through without serious injury than if your muscles were tight and locked into a short range of motion. Stretching also helps to develop your strength by, in essence, creating more room for the growth of the muscle.

When we ask questions about our faith and seek answers, we are stretching our faith. This broadens our understanding of who God is and how people through time have tried to answer these questions. This knowledge in itself helps us to remain open to what others are thinking, even when we are comfortable with where we are in our faith. It means that when life throws a curve ball at our faith, the death of a parent or spouse, war, epidemic, illness, the revelation that something we had built our faith on isn't true, we have the flexibility to survive, there is less chance of a faith shattering injury.

I ask questions of my faith all the time; Why is there evil in the world? What do these biblical texts mean and how do they fit with who God calls us to be? What happens to my friend Rachel who acts more Christian than a lot of Christians I know, but doesn't believe?

By seeking answers, I build up the foundation of my faith, I find the answers that let me say with confidence, "Right now in my life, this is what I believe about this. But I'm willing to think about it. To listen more to the word of God in scripture and through other believers."

Now, just because we ask the question and seek the answer doesn't mean that we will find one, or that we should even expect to find one. I agree with Luther

that there are things that will remain a “mystery” and perhaps learn the answer to in the great by and by. There are questions that we seek answers to that push us to the edge of trying to be like God or knowing what God knows. That sounds an awful lot like the problem Adam and Eve had.

In these moments, we fall back upon the faith that we have. A faith, a trust, in the promise of God we find in Jesus Christ. Thomas, in his personal experience of Jesus, finds all he needs to answer his own questions. “My Lord and My God!” We can have these experiences anywhere, but we can most certainly find them where Thomas did. On a Sunday, in a gathering of believers. When we come together we bring our questions, our pain, our doubts. Sometimes they are answered in this place; through the text, or a hymn, or a sermon, a conversation, or through our own meditation. But sometimes, we don’t have those moments. I’ve talked with people who have been devastated by tragedies in their life who have admitted to me that during those times, when they were in church, they weren’t even sure that they believed in God. “So why did you come?”, I asked. “Because I needed the community to believe for me.”

When we question, when we doubt, we come to this gathering knowing we will meet the crucified and risen Jesus in the Word proclaimed and the Meal shared. But also because in those moments, we lean on the faith of others. Those who we have walked this discipleship journey with. Their faith becomes a splint for our own, buttressing us until that point at which it is healed and can stand on our own.

Questions/Doubt that is rooted in faith is at the heart of a living and healthy faith. It engages the whole of who we are in our worship of God- mind as well as soul.

So, here is what I am inviting you to do. You should have a blank piece of paper from when you walked in this morning. I would invite you to take a few moments now, during the hymn of the day and the passing of the peace, to write down your question(s), your doubts about our faith. What is something you have always wondered? What have you/are you struggling with in your faith life and belief right now? You don't need to put your name on it. Just fold it over and put it in the offering plate during this time or as you go. If you are watching online, post them in the comments or email them to me. I'll gather these together and will begin posting responses to these questions on a regular basis in a variety of formats. If we get enough of the same questions, we might even look into a forum or series of forums around these questions.

On the first day of the week, we have gathered as a community of believers. Not in fear and behind locked doors, but as a gathering of those who "Have seen the Lord" here before, just last week! and are expectantly waiting to see him again. What questions do you have for the one who loves us, who has freed us from sin by his blood, and who has made of us doubting, questioning, believers a royal priesthood?