

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense's closing statement, the lawyer, knowing his client probably would be convicted, resorted to a trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch.

"Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom." He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened.

Finally, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement; but you all looked on with anticipation. Therefore, I put to you that you have a reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty.

"But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door."

The jury foreman replied, "Oh, we looked, but your client didn't."

Doubt—is it a good thing or a bad thing, or can it be both? In today's scripture we read about one moment in Thomas' faith journey. Thomas is remembered most for the moment when he doubted that Jesus could rise from the dead. His fellow disciples tried to convince Thomas that they saw Jesus. But, he refused to believe it possible until he could touch Jesus' wounds.

A missionary family was visiting an aunt and uncle. When the missionary children were called in for dinner, their mother said, "Be sure to wash your hands. Get the germs off!"

The little boy scowled and said, "Germs and Jesus...germs and Jesus. That's all I hear, and I've never seen either one of them."

There are many cynics in the world today...they do not believe God and Jesus exist, simply because they cannot see or touch the physical beings of God and Jesus. Thomas knew Jesus lived and died...but what he was questioning was whether Jesus arose from the grave. And for this he was branded as "doubting Thomas." His reputation as a skeptic is not only undeserved, but is also the result of a too casual reading of the text.

That's very unfortunate. You see, Thomas said and did other notable things that we can read about in the bible. For example, the Gospel writer John recounts the story of Lazarus...Jesus' friend who died. When Jesus got word of this he told his disciples that they must go to Bethany which was where Lazarus and his sisters lived.

The disciples argued that this was not a smart idea because the religious leaders in Jerusalem were angry with Jesus. Bethany was close to Jerusalem and so the disciples feared that going to Bethany was like throwing one's self into a den of angry lions. However, we read Thomas' response to this in John 11:16, "Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'"

Thomas didn't question Jesus then, instead he was calling upon the rest of the disciples to take up their courage and go with Jesus to Bethany...even though it could mean risking their lives. Now...we don't remember Thomas for his words in this story. Why don't we remember him as "Courageous Thomas" instead of doubting Thomas? This first glimpse of Thomas in John 11 should remind us that there is more to a person than a convenient "sound bite" of an experience.

In his book, "Imagine Your Life Without Fear" Max Lucado gives some significant insight when he says,

"Questions can make hermits out of us, driving us into hiding. Yet the cave has no answers. Christ distributes courage through community; he dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess and pray, Christ speaks."

We learn from Thomas that we should have courage even when there is uncertainty...courage that will inspire others on to faithful living.

Then in John 14 we can read another story involving Thomas. This is what it says in John 14: 1"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. 2In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. 3And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. 4And where I go you know, and the way you know." 5Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?"

After years of hearing the interpretation of these words, we may find it hard to believe that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was talking about...but they didn't. Thomas wasn't afraid to push the envelope a little and say to Jesus what the others were thinking too. He wasn't afraid to tell Jesus that he didn't understand.

Because Thomas asked his question, Jesus went on to explain what he meant in simpler terms. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. 7" If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him." Because Thomas was not afraid to tell Jesus he did not

understand, Jesus explained, and now we also can understand what Jesus meant. Why then, don't we call him "Honest Thomas" instead of "Doubting Thomas"?

This Thomas story should challenge us to consider why it's not easy admitting when we do not understand everything we read in the Bible. Is it because it can be uncomfortable asking questions because others may think our questions are laughable; or we are worried that others will judge our faith as being weak. Is it because it can be very embarrassing when we are asked hard faith questions and we cannot answer them?

Then there's the third story we find about Thomas in the John scripture I read to you today. From this text the assumption is made that Thomas doubts Jesus is alive again, is a sign of having a weak faith. But Thomas really wasn't the only disciple in the room that had doubts about the risen Christ.

If we go back to read verses 19 & 20 in chapter 20 of John, we find that Jesus felt he had to show the rest of the disciples his hands and side...the undeniable markings of the Crucifixion... so they too could see his wounds and know that it really was him. Apparently Jesus knew they needed to see the exact same things that later...Thomas said he needed to see in order to believe. Put yourself in their sandals...wouldn't most of us, if not all of us want or need the same kind of proof to believe?

Yet Thomas is the only one branded as the doubter. Why does the Christian community have such a negative attitude toward doubt? We have been reared in a religious environment in which doubt is posed as the opposite of faith. And this story of Thomas is often used to reinforce that lesson. But isn't the "doubt vs. faith" contradiction a false issue? Is not the real enemy of faith unbelief rather than doubt? I think so.

I think that doubt has a constructive and positive role to play in the exercise of faith. As we've already seen, doubts lead to questions, which, presents the opportunity to get to know God better...to deepen our love for God and deepen our faith in God. We should not allow our doubts lead us to ignorance...leaving us to feel uncertain and critical about the depth of our faith...and worse yet about the existence of God. If we do that...then doubt can get us in trouble.

The devil had a closing down sale and was selling all his tools and devices of destruction. Someone asked him how much he wanted for the wedge of doubt. He said, "It's not for sale. I can get back into business with that anytime."

We need to accept our doubts and use them to lead us on a journey...a search towards God. The only person with a weak faith is the one who allows their doubts to end their search for God...leaving their faith and service stagnate. Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote in his book, "Wishful Thinking," "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

May we never ignore our doubts. Instead may we embrace our doubts...ask the questions...and go after the answers. May we use our doubts to shape us into courageous and honest followers of Christ. May we allow our doubts to lead us into seeking God and into growing a stronger faith. Amen.