

Second Sunday of Easter/ John 20:19-31

Doubting Thomas

The Gospel story I just read is one of my favorite gospel stories and for a long time. As a young Catholic girl growing up in NJ and attending Catholic school, the nuns made sure that the children knew the story of what was called Doubting Thomas. Why was this story so important? It's the line in the story that many modern people remember, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

Those are the words made for those of us who believe in Christ but have never viewed the body of Jesus in the flesh after resurrection, which is all modern Christians. As a young girl, it made me feel a little bit superior if I am honest. It was a matter of faith and of course I had it. I didn't need to see wounds to get there. That was a long time ago, and while the story of doubting Thomas remains a favorite, my views on its message has evolved over the years. And when I look more closely into the story of Thomas, there is so much more to learn.

In the Gospel of John, he calls out one apostle, Thomas the twin, as an example to be made of as the doubter. This may be a reason why it stuck for so long, it was one person, and he had a name. Thomas was easy to point to, but is it fair that he has been assigned this characteristic of the doubter?

What are we told happened? There is a lot going on in this account and the story of doubt is thrown following other powerful commentary. It is interesting to note that this first appearance of Jesus so soon after the women advised the others that Jesus was not in the tomb, indicates that Jesus appeared to his disciples, not only the apostles. The apostles are known as the 12 who were closest to Jesus and were all men. The disciples were the larger group of close followers, and they included multiple women among them. I point this out because the first part of the Gospel tells us that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on all of them and gave them what we call today the sacrament of confession. "If you forgive the sins of any,

they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained". This is the first time that Jesus gives the disciples this spiritual power to forgive others. That is in itself a significant task the disciples have been assigned, but then the story veers off into the account of doubt.

We learn that Thomas was absent from this first appearance, and I want to give him the benefit of my doubt as to why. Remember this is only days after the horror of Good Friday when everyone there either witnessed or heard of the killing of Jesus. They were scared for their lives. The reading tells us that in the meeting room, the doors are locked for fear of the Jews, meaning that they too may be imprisoned or worse if someone points them out as followers of Jesus. They are also grieving the loss, even as they heard that he somehow has been raised from the dead. Thomas perhaps had to be with members of his family to console them in the face of the events of the last few days.

The Gospel story continues with the Second appearance and here is where Thomas speaks. "Unless I see the mark of the nail in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas doubts the words told to him by his friends. He was pushing out of his mind the fact that Jesus has been raised, and declares that if this is so, he wants to see him with his own eyes.

This is Empirical Thomas. The definition of empirical is: based on, concerned with or verifiable by observation or experience. By this definition, I think we are all like Thomas. It is the characteristic of modern humans to observe, record, and to witness truth. Our legal system is based on the concept of witnessing.

But was Thomas truly the only disciple who doubted? I checked the other 3 Gospels and here is what I found: Luke 24 Jesus says, "handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have
Mark 16 Jesus appeared before the apostles as they sat a table, and "upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart," because they did not believe those who saw him after he had risen

Matthew 28 says that when they saw him after he appeared to them in Galilee, some worshipped him, but some doubted

We see then that Thomas is not the only one who doubted the resurrection of the body of Jesus. All 4 Gospels have a story of doubt by those who were closest to Jesus, his apostles and disciples. Thomas is in good company, and we can be consoled that the idea of doubt was important to include in the gospel accounts. The honesty is refreshing because it tells me this is real, accurate, a faithful telling of how humans respond in grief and loss, some of them need more to be convinced.

Those persons writing down the Gospel stories 75-100 years after the events of the Resurrection were at a crucial point in the establishment of the early church. They needed to ensure that people believed that there was a resurrection and Jesus is alive. Was this written in earnestness by the author of John to make a compelling case that Jesus did resurrect in his body? Was this critical to the beliefs of the early church?

Spirits we have always had, but bodily resurrection is not the same. The early Gospel authors were trying to make a point that his is different. Jesus is unique and he matters because he overcame the evil that put him to death

It also gave something to his followers; it made it more real for the first Christians. This was a testament of witnessing after all. The end of our reading today indicates that "there were many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. And that through believing you may have life in his name"

So that is it, Jesus is the Messiah, the gospel writers were attempting to persuade their audience that Jesus is the promised sign that arose from the Jewish religion. What is the benefit of that? Eternal life, life after death, a life in this world and then outside of it. They had a lot to account for.

So, twenty-three hundred years later, what does this say to us. We must take it as a matter of faith the nature of Jesus resurrection, that he was visibly tortured and crucified as we heard from the witnesses and historical account of that time. For me, the nature of a resurrected body, what happens after death, I cannot say with any facts. None of us can. It may be less important as time has passed

What brings us all here week after week to worship the 3 persons of God, Jesus and Spirit is our experiences and for that we have many accounts and witnesses. In her sermons. Rev Susan asks us to listen to the voice of God in our hearts and to do good in this world. Our presiding Bishop Michael Curry asks us to look to the words and life of Jesus and to put our attention there, the most important example being to love one another.

We see the two halves of our Christian faith every Sunday: we listen to the Gospel and hear as they plead with us to listen to the actions, the death and resurrection of Jesus who became the Christ for all humanity, who expanded from an itinerant Jewish teacher into a savior for all persons, regardless of country, upbringing, culture. The Gospels were written for the audience of Jewish people and Gentile, saints and sinners, old and young, and believers and non-believers.

The other half are the stories since the Gospels of people who encounter Christ in their lives, some who follow and some who wait. Our contemporary stories are those of people like Mother Teresa who dedicated her life to aiding the poor and sick that were outcast by society, and who also doubted. by Bill W who founded Alcoholics Anonymous and saved countless people from addictions, and who also had doubts. by Martin Luther King Jr who helped to move a country out of the Jim Crow darkness into the light of the Civil Rights movement and he also doubted.

And countless more including the stories of each one of us. We all make a difference whether small or large, we all are witnesses to the power of God in our lives. It is amazing what comes out of the depth of doubt. I suggest it is the cornerstone of faith, to pull something out and question so that we may come

to a conclusion about where we stand. I can tell you when my doubts hit hardest and the light that they subsequently brought in to my life. Without one I could not have had the other.

Because that is our story, we have the wilderness and the green valley, we have despair and joy, and we have belief and non-belief. Having doubts to me means keeping an open mind. Doubt means uncertainty, the deliberate suspension of judgment. We keep our minds open to seeing the experience that counters our doubt and then, with faith, we are moved to a belief that we build upon as our experiences gather around us.

If any of you have doubts, welcome to the world of faith where doubt and belief lie side by side. Thomas had a quick one week change of heart when he came face to face with the wounds in the hands and side of Jesus. We may need to arrive at our belief in a longer and circuitous way, but our belief when found is no less firm than Thomas. And I believe that God welcomes doubt as he is in relationship with us. Doubt is not something to hide.

Perhaps I have persuaded you that Thomas is not the person who we point fingers to and who makes us feel superior as we believe and have not seen. Thomas is humanity in the flesh, standing in the Gospel for the many who also doubted in the early weeks after Resurrection. Thomas is us today, giving us permission to have our doubts about the nature of Jesus as well. As long as we stand with open minds, willing to experience the other side of doubt, we are blessedly human. And Christ knows and works with that, always.

Amen