

**Easter 2, Year A, RCL: The Gospel of John
Church of the Redeemer, March 30, 2008**

I remember hearing a sermon on this Gospel from John a number of years ago. I remember it because I disagreed vehemently with the preacher's opening lines. He said, "I never want to be a disciple like Thomas." And he went on to give a very typical sermon about the disciple who has been labeled "Doubting Thomas."

I happen to like Thomas. I like him even more now that I've spent time with this gospel text and with some other readings. For some reason it seems easy and all too common to characterize Thomas as the doubter, the disbeliever, the deficient one. Yes, well, aren't we all at some point or – honestly – many points in our lives doubting, or disbelieving or feel deficient? Show me anyone who has spent even a moment considering their faith, and I'll show you someone who has experienced some feeling of doubt or disbelief or deficiency.

So if we consider Thomas as the one who doubts, then we should invite him into our good company. Or . . . we could consider him a little more closely.

When our story begins, Thomas is absent. His absence is not explained, nor is it ever remarked upon in any way. We could imagine a number of possibilities about where Thomas had gone: for food, for water, for fresh air. Perhaps, he alone had believed the testimony of Mary Magdalene of her dawn encounter with the risen Jesus. Perhaps Thomas has gone to the tomb to look for Jesus. We will never know where Thomas was. And apparently to the author of the gospel, Thomas' whereabouts were not important.

As our gospel begins, we find the disciples – all but Thomas - in a locked house on the evening of the first day of the week. It was the evening of the same day that Peter and the beloved disciple had found the empty tomb. Just that morning that Mary had encountered the risen Jesus and had run with joy to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

But there was no joy on this evening. No celebration. The doors were locked. They were afraid. For the disciples, there had been no resurrection, no Easter. The disciples apparently had not believed Mary.

So, we should be talking about the doubting disciples! ALL of them doubted!

Until Jesus appeared in their midst. And he showed the disciples – SHOWED them! – his hands and his side. And then – not until then, not until they had seen for themselves – did they rejoice.

Mary saw Jesus. He called her by name, and she believed. She recognized her risen Lord.

Then the disciples received what Mary did: they saw Jesus. They saw his hands and side. They recognized their Lord.

And then there is Thomas. Poor Thomas. When I imagine how Thomas must have felt when he learned that he had missed the presence of Jesus...

Have you ever had to miss an important event? A wedding? A birth? A family reunion? My cousin missed his sister's wedding because the ship which he commanded deployed early. How many

fathers have missed the birth of their own children in these last five years? Sometimes we miss events in life that leave us with enormous regret, loss, disappointment – even guilt.

I imagine that Thomas was devastated.

The disciples say to Thomas: “We have seen the Lord!” These words are exactly what Mary said to the disciples: “I have seen the Lord!” The disciples had not believed Mary. Why should Thomas believe the disciples?

Thomas at least is unequivocal: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in his side, I will not believe.”

Thomas demands no less than what had already been given to Mary and to the disciples. To judge Thomas harshly as the only “Doubting one” reduces the text and Thomas to one dimension. Honestly, I cannot say that if I had been in Thomas’ place that I would have wanted anything different. Would you have believed? Wouldn’t you have wanted to see and touch? I would!

What is remarkable about this gospel is not Thomas...but Jesus. What we need to pay attention to is not the reaction of the disciples and Thomas. Look at what Jesus does. Listen to what he says. Listen also to what he does NOT say.

The first time Jesus appears to disciples, he grants them peace and immediately showed them his hands and his side. He did not say “I told you so” to Peter. He did not ask them why they ran away. He did not even ask them why they were locked in the house. Jesus admonishes the disciples countless times in the gospels. Take note that he does not do so here.

When Jesus appears again, eight days later, he again offers Peace to those present. And without another word, he focuses solely on Thomas.

“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Or as the Greek more literally says: “Be not faithless but faithful.”

And once again, Jesus does not utter a single word of admonition. Not one. He gives to Thomas what he gave to the others: himself.

One commentary states that any attempt to see Jesus as shaming Thomas is incorrect.¹ “Jesus is not attempting to shame Thomas, but is giving Thomas what he needs for faith.”

And here is the grace and good news of the Gospel. Jesus gives us what we need for faith. And we – today – are reassured by Jesus’ words that we are blessed for believing even though we have not seen.

Again, we should pay attention to what Jesus does NOT say. Jesus does not say we are blessed for not doubting. Nor did he condemn doubt. Jesus knows how difficult a thing faith is – and will be.

Paul Tillich is considered one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. This is what he writes about faith and doubt. “If doubt appears, it should not be considered as the negation of faith, but as an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith.”² He goes on to explain that “serious doubt is confirmation of faith.” Doubt is confirmation of faith because it shows how seriously and deeply one is considering the question of faith.

It is a mistake for us to feel guilt or anxiety over our doubts. Doubt does not mean that we have lost faith or lack faith. To experience doubt means that we are thinking about our faith and considering it seriously. To consider one's faith with any amount of depth and authenticity will usually leave us with questions.

It is good to have questions. Having questions leads us to seek answers.

Thomas had doubts. And Thomas knew and expressed what he needed to address those doubts. And Jesus met those needs.

Part of an active faith life is seeking a deeper knowledge of God.
Deep faith comes from an intimate and ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ.
(Yes, I know that might sound a little evangelical to some ears.)
[*Note: I said this at the 8:00 service but left it out at 10:30.I*]

Our faith deepens as we encounter Jesus in our lives, in prayer and worship and through others. As we experience life and faith, we will have questions and doubts.

Why cancer? Why miscarriage? Addiction? Loneliness?
Why war? Why poverty? Hunger? Thirst? Disease?
This path, God? or the other? If God is good, why is there evil?

When our faith bumps up against our lives and the world, we will have doubts. We want to believe, but we struggle with doubt. We want to depend upon our faith, but we wonder if it is enough to sustain us.

And this is why I like Thomas. Thomas teaches us to have the boldness to declare what we doubt and what we need for faith.

When you find yourself doubting – pray. When you find yourself wondering about the strength of your faith – pray. Pray. Ask questions. Seek answers. Worship in community. Pray some more – boldly. Like Thomas. [Go ahead...doubt – boldly! But then pray boldly!]

This gospel is not about doubt. This gospel is about faith.
Remember that Jesus promises to meet us in our need.
This gospel is about Jesus' great love for those who seek him.
Remember that you are blessed because you have not seen, and yet have come to believe.

Valerie Hayes

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX (Nashville: Abington, 1995), p. 850.

² Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, p. 25.