

“What Do We Do With Our Doubts?”

John 20: 19-31
Triune Mercy Center
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Poor Thomas. He misses all the excitement. The other disciples see Jesus, but he doesn't. It's not too surprising, really, that Thomas would doubt that Jesus was alive after the Crucifixion; it's a pretty unbelievable story, way too good to be true. My guess is that what Thomas really doubts is his friends' sanity; he probably figures they are having hallucinations of Jesus. They have completely lost their marbles.

But then, a full week later, Jesus appears again, and Thomas is there this time. Jesus offers his hands and his side for Thomas to touch; the text does not tell us whether Thomas actually touches Jesus or not, but it does tell us that Thomas responds to Jesus by saying, “My Lord and my God!”

Through the centuries, Thomas has had a pretty lousy reputation. “Doubting Thomas” has typically been held up for us as an example of what **not** to do and be. Even Jesus says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The Church through the centuries has tended to interpret Jesus' words as a rebuke of Thomas, that he shouldn't doubt. Even recently, many a person has been told, “Don't ask questions; don't doubt. It's not your place to question God; just believe.”

But let's think about this a minute: The Gospel of John was written at least 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, if not 80; the first people reading or hearing this Gospel were several generations removed from those who had seen Jesus in person. They were growing confused and impatient that Jesus hadn't returned yet, like they thought he would. So they would have heard these words of Jesus not as a rebuke of Thomas but as a blessing on them: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

So, if Jesus may not be rebuking Thomas here, maybe we need to look more closely at this story, to try to see it in a new way. Because, after all, if we're honest with ourselves and with God, we, like Thomas, have doubts, and lots of them. We have questions that are impossible to answer satisfactorily. When we look around at all the bad things in the world, we sometimes wonder if God is truly good. Sometimes we even doubt God is real. And when we're in that tough place, it's easy to feel guilty, because we've heard that we're not supposed to question God. So, we don't say anything; we feel ashamed that we have these questions and we accuse ourselves of having a weak faith, or no faith at all. Then we feel judged and alone, like we're the only one in the world, in the history of the world, who has these questions and doubts, and that only makes the burden that much heavier.

So, as we wonder what in the world to do with our doubts, I propose that Thomas can help us; Thomas can actually be a positive example, rather than a negative example, of how to handle our doubts. First of all, we can recognize that it was normal for Thomas to doubt that Jesus was alive; that news was just too good to be true. And it's normal for us to have doubts

too. Secondly, Thomas speaks his doubts out loud; he admits them, to himself and to his closest friends. He deals with those doubts openly and honestly; he doesn't try to deny them, or ignore them, or sweep them under the rug, or talk himself out of them. We would do well to follow his lead. Whatever question or doubt you may have, I can guarantee you that you are not the first one to have it, and most assuredly, you won't be the last one to have it either. Speaking that question or doubt out loud to someone else somehow makes it a shared burden, and it loses at least a little bit of its power. Thomas teaches us to speak up.

Thirdly, even feeling those strong doubts, Thomas stays with his community; he doesn't withdraw from his friends. It can be all too easy for us to isolate ourselves from the community of faith when we have serious doubts; it can feel awkward and hypocritical to keep going to church. Yet staying in dialogue with fellow Christians about questions of faith, and remaining a part of the community of faith, are healthy, good strategies for addressing our doubts. In all likelihood, we'll discover that someone else has wrestled with that particular question. Maybe, my bringing up a doubt of mine frees you to share a question that's bothering you. And even if we can't answer each other's questions and doubts, at least we're not alone with them. We need each other, especially when we have doubts; we need each other, all the time.

And finally, we see in this story that the other disciples stay in relationship with Thomas even when he's saying things that are difficult to answer or address. They don't nudge him out the door; they don't exclude him from the gatherings. We, the community of faith, may feel awkward when someone is expressing deep doubts, but we can follow the lead of the original disciples; we can support and encourage each other in our times of doubt, by not being horrified when someone else admits doubts to us, by walking with them in their tough stretch.

But all of this is a lot easier said than done. Wrestling with our doubts is very hard work. Genuine searching takes a lot of emotional energy and spiritual focus. Asking deep questions about God and faith can knock us off-center; we can feel like we're blowing in the wind, or missing an anchor. It's scary to stand face to face with the unanswerable questions of life, like:

- * Why do bad things happen?
- * Why do the wicked prosper?
- * If God is loving, how can there be school shootings, human trafficking, sexual abuse of children, and so many other horrors?

Even people who are considered "spiritual giants" from throughout the centuries have encountered serious struggles with doubt. They tell of experiences of spiritual abandonment; they write about "the dark night of the soul". No matter who we are, spiritual giant or not, at times we can feel that God is distant, silent, absent, or non-existent. Our doubts can become a roadblock in our lives, an impenetrable barrier between us and God. We can feel trapped in this horrible place.

I wonder, though, if sometimes we can be tempted to use our doubts as an excuse, as a “reason” we can’t live the way God wants us to live. Our thought process may go something like this, “*Well, since I can’t be sure that God even exists, I’m just going to do as I please.*” Or, “*Well, with all these unanswered questions, I can’t live the Christian life now; I’ll just have to wait till all my questions have been answered.*” It can be all too easy to turn our doubts around to our own advantage, as a way of weaseling out of living the way Christ calls us to live, because it’s hard to live the Christian life. It’s hard:

- to put God first and center in our lives, above everything and everybody else;
- to turn the other cheek;
- to return to no one evil for evil;
- to take the log out of my own eye before I try to take the speck from yours;
- to love my enemies;
- not to judge others;
- not to worry;
- to pray constantly.

The kind of life God calls us to is difficult, and doubts can be an “easy out” for us. We can end up using our doubts as a shield, protecting us from the challenging call to discipleship.

Yet I’d like to propose today that doubt can be something other than this kind of a shield, and it can be something other than a roadblock. It seems to me that doubt can be a bridge that leads us to a different place. Doubt can be a signal to us that our current beliefs are no longer adequate for the complexities of life, that our current beliefs are too simplistic and elementary for a different stage of life. And as we begin to question those childhood beliefs, or even just former beliefs, our faith has room to grow to a deeper level, to new understandings, and to a greater maturity. Just as a snake sheds its old skin in order to accommodate new growth, doubt can be part of the normal process of growing, of realizing I’m “outgrowing” these old understandings of God and life, and now I’m growing into a deeper maturity.

It can be scary to walk over that bridge, wondering if it will hold our weight, wondering where it is leading. It can be a whole lot easier simply to stay stuck in old, dissatisfying ruts; it can be a whole lot easier to hide behind a shield of doubt; it can be easier to remain in a simplistic and immature faith. Walking over that bridge, facing those tough questions about God and life, is hard work. But remembering this story of Thomas, we can look at doubt differently; we can see doubt not as an enemy to be resisted, but as an unlikely friend, who helps us grow to a deeper understanding of God.

So now, as we come to this communion table, remember that it is Jesus Christ who invites you to this holy meal. No matter what your doubts are, no matter what your mistakes are, or your burdens, or your fears, you’re invited to encounter here the Risen Christ, to drink deeply of his love, to eat this bread of life and be satisfied. Come and be filled.