

Title: Faith and (Un)certainty

Date: 4/16/2023 (Easter 2, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Acts 2:14a,22-32](#); [1 Peter 1:3-9](#); [John 20:19-31](#); [Psalm 16](#)

Video Link: https://youtu.be/DyZYzg_ApQM?t=1273

I have set the LORD always before me;
because God is at my right hand I shall not fall.
My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my body also shall rest in hope. (Ps 16:8-9)
Amen.

Happy Easter! This is the second Sunday of the Easter season. After the joy of Easter Day, we stand in the shadow cast by the glory of the resurrection.

This is the Sunday we talk about Thomas.

This is the Sunday we dedicate to talking about doubt.

How many of you have ever called someone a Doubting Thomas?
Have many of you have ever meant it in a good way?

I'm going to go out and say it:

Thomas has gotten a bad rap.

We've done him wrong, and by extension, we have done ourselves wrong.

Thomas had publicists that were good enough to convince people to name him a saint. But they were **not** good enough to keep his feast day from being so close to Christmas (Dec 21), and **not** good enough for the story we know him for to be assigned to a Sunday after one of the two biggest feast days of the year, a day when attendance is said to be low (thank you for coming back!).

It's as if we are embarrassed by him.

It's as if we don't want to be contaminated by him.

When we read this story by itself, it's easy to focus on Thomas' doubts. It's easy to shame him for asking for proof of bodily resurrection. It's easy to paint him as a person of little faith, for Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That's a statement that can and has been used to shut down discussion. It puts an end to questions and doubts without **actually** addressing those questions and doubts. It can and has been used to pressure people to "take this on faith," or "just believe."

This is very likely the writers of the gospel breaking through the fourth wall, speaking directly to those hearing this story in the future, praising us for believing without actually meeting Jesus in person. When that statement is used to put down Thomas and people who are willing to voice their doubts, it is used without regard for the rest of his story.

Thomas speaks in two other instances in the gospel according to John.

The first time he spoke was in the story of Lazarus. A few days after Jesus received the news that Lazarus had fallen ill, he decided to return to Judea. The disciples tried to talk him out of it. There had already been one attempt to stone Jesus, and it was likely the authorities were going to try to arrest him if he showed up at Bethany.

As everyone else tried to persuade Jesus to stay away, Thomas was the one who told them, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (Jn 11:16).

Thomas was willing to die for Jesus, and he encouraged other people to follow Jesus, no matter the consequences.

The second time he spoke was at the Last Supper. After Jesus told them he was preparing a place for them in his Father's house, it was Thomas who asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5). It is because he asked this question that we have Jesus' response, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6).

Thomas was willing to devote his life to Jesus. He wanted to know how he could follow Jesus, wherever he was going.

Then Jesus was crucified, died and buried. Imagine how traumatizing that was for the disciples. We talk about how Peter said he wouldn't deny Jesus and ended up denying him three times. The same thing happened to Thomas. Thomas didn't die with Jesus as he thought he would, as he encouraged other people to do. Thomas didn't follow Jesus' way into the grave.

I wonder if he felt guilty for being alive.
I wonder if he was disappointed in himself.

I wonder if he wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared because he was too ashamed to show his face in front of the other disciples and, on the off-chance that Mary Magdalene and Peter and the beloved disciple were right, to show his face in front of Jesus.

Then word got back to him that Jesus had appeared. The other disciples were huddled together in this house and had locked the doors out of fear. Yet, Jesus came and showed them his hands and his side. He showed them the wounds made by the nails of the crucifixion and the spear used to confirm he was truly dead. He stood so close to them they could feel his breath. Addressing their fear and grief, Jesus spoke of peace and forgiveness.

Having heard the witness of his fellow disciples, Thomas was hopeful...and Thomas was afraid to hope. He wanted to believe, but he had believed before, and look at how things turned out. He had just enough faith to join them once again **and** at the same time he insisted, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my fingers in the mark of his nails and my hands in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 21:25).

As the saying goes, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”? And even though some paintings shows that Thomas then leaned over and stuck a finger into the wound in Jesus' side, or that Jesus reached out to pull Thomas' hand toward him to touch his side, that is NOT what the gospel says.

In the moment of seeing the risen Christ for himself, Thomas simply said, “My Lord and my God!”

In the called *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Eric Elnes writes, "Faith built upon certainty is a house of cards that falls apart when the 'unshakable foundation' shifts even slightly" (25).

There is this tendency to criticize Thomas for voicing his doubts and for the depth of his doubts. But neither Mary Magdalene nor the other disciples believed until they had seen Jesus and heard him speak. They needed to see, too.

The difference between them and Thomas was that Thomas was willing to ask the question. He probably wasn't the only one in the room who was wondering about this whole bodily resurrection thing; he was just the only one who was willing to say that out loud.

A week earlier the other disciples saw Jesus and rejoiced; when Thomas saw Jesus, he didn't just rejoice. He worshipped him and proclaimed his divinity to all.

By being open with his doubts, he gave Jesus a chance to affirm the importance of the body in our life of faith. As we prayed at the beginning of this service, Grant that we who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith.¹ By this they will know whose disciples we are.

By being honest with his doubts, he gave Jesus a chance to respond. He gave himself a chance to grow in faith.

Even though the world knows him for his doubts, in the end, out of all the disciples Thomas traveled the farthest to spread the good news of Christ.

He is said to have sailed to India in 50 AD and established the Seven and Half Churches in Kerala, and St. Mary's Orthodox Church² in Tamil Nadu, built in 63 AD, is said to be the oldest existing church structure in the world. And today, there is a Mar Thoma church in Austin. Thomas, a man known for his doubts, should just as well known for this extraordinary act of faith.

There is a quote that has been attributed to everyone from the theologian Paul Tillich to the writer Anne Lamott.

"The opposite of faith isn't doubt, it's certainty."

If we aren't willing to ask questions, if we aren't willing to entertain doubts, our faith will be a fragile one.

We have physical muscles, and we have spiritual muscles. If we never push our boundaries, if we aren't willing to risk those small tears, our spirituality will remain at the surface level. It will not be strong enough to weather the chances and changes of the world.

If we aren't willing to ask the questions out loud, God will not have the chance to speak to us through the answers. So, as the Psalm reminds us, set the Lord always before you. Ask your questions and voice your doubts... **with** the goal of growing closer to God, and stronger in faith.

May we be faithful like Doubting Thomas. May *our* journeys of faith also take us to places we could never have expected and open our eyes and hearts to see and seek the kind of resurrection we could have never imagined. Amen.

¹ http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEaster2_RCL.html

² <https://www.onlinekanyakumari.com/first-church-in-tamil-nadu/>