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First Presbyterian Church
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Easter 2
John 20: 19-31

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¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

“The Other Easter Story”

Poor Thomas. Every year on the Sunday after Easter he just gets totally beat up. We hear his story every year on this Sunday, and we can't help but pick on him a bit. He is, after all, the disciple who doubted. Everyone knows his story. He's one of the more famous disciples.

I've always appreciated this Sunday because there's something very authentic about the way Jesus' friends conduct themselves after the trauma of crucifixion and the mystery of resurrection. According to John's Gospel, they essentially do nothing. They remain in a locked room in Jerusalem, hiding I suppose, and waiting for things to settle down so they can sneak out of town and return to Galilee and their lives before they met Jesus.

When the first resurrection appearance occurs Thomas was not in the room with the rest of them. Where do you suppose Thomas was? Frederick Buechner speculates that he is sitting on a park bench somewhere, feeding pigeons, thinking it all over. I think he was out running errands. Ever the realist, Thomas is checking things off from his to-do list. When Jesus appears Thomas misses it and, completely understandably, refuses to believe it when his friends try to explain what happened. It will forever earn him the name “Doubting Thomas”, but I prefer “Realistic Thomas”.

But let's face it. The reason we all know Thomas is because we can relate to him. Seeing is believing, as they say. Most of us need to see it to believe it, so we can totally understand why Thomas asks to see Jesus' sides and hands.

But a doubting faith isn't a bad faith, as some people may lead you to believe. I've often said that if you never ask any questions, you never learn anything new. You don't grow. You don't mature. So a reasonable amount of doubting is a good thing.

Frederick Beuchner (again) once said that doubts are the “ants in the pants of our faith”. I like this illustration, because our doubts keep us moving.

In the same vein, Kathleen Norris, in her book “Amazing Grace”, wrote that it took her a long time to understand that faith is best thought of as a verb; it surges and ebbs, and sometimes it’s very discernable, and sometimes it’s very distant. She said it took her a long time to understand that faith is not a noun; it’s not a thing that you either have or don’t have.

It’s been said that a faith that does not doubt is a dead faith. Anne Lamott once said the opposite of faith isn’t doubt, it’s certainty. “Certainty is missing the point entirely, she said. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.

You know, some of God’s most faithful servants have usually been among the most doubtful.

Abraham and Sarah were incredulous when God promised them a son in their old age. Jonah had so much doubt he tried to run as far from Ninevah as he possibly could. Moses was convinced he was not the person to lead the people out of Egypt.

So Thomas is part of a long line of distinguished doubters. When he says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe,” he’s following the lead of some of the best-known Biblical characters.

And yet, people seem to forget his story and believe that when doubts creep up, something has gone horribly wrong. And I must confess that I grow weary of people who believe that the only true faith is one that never has a question and who, as one writer said, “treat the Bible as though it is a historical regurgitation of ancient days.”¹ Such a reading cheapens the Bible and does away with our responsibility to discern how God’s Word speak to us today and how we that word should inform how we tackle difficult questions.

¹ Kolbell, “Were You There”, p. 147.

Because life's difficult questions cannot be answered simply, and for some of the more complex questions, we may never find answers. So I'm glad that Thomas had his doubts. We're entitled to ours, too.

In 1995 in Oklahoma City, some months after Timothy McVeigh leveled the Alfred R Murrah building, a psychotherapist began working with surviving families, particularly the parents of the young children who were in the building's 1st floor day care center. A great many of them had their doubts, too.

One of his more poignant observations about his time with the survivors had to do with the religious underpinnings of their lives. He wrote:

This is by and large a pretty religiously conservative town. A great many folks have been raised and nurtured on the idea that if they lead good and faithful lives then God will reward them.

When their husband or wife or child died in that blast, many of them threw themselves into their faith, not only for comfort, but to understand, as one woman who lost her daughter said, "Why God did this to me." But the old formulas didn't fit. The assurances they had been given to believe in were no longer sufficient.

If these people remain people of faith, they will come to believe in a very different God. The doubts that were raised by this one experience will see to that." ("Were You There?" Erik Kolbell, p. 148).

Having questions is part of growing in our faith. We all have them and hopefully, they help us to grow. Most of us probably don't believe the same things we believed as children, or as young adults or what have you. I know when I look back at old sermons, I don't always believe the same things I wrote, because life and study and experience-and the Holy Spirit-have led me to a different understanding.

As Kathleen Norris wrote, the Bible, the Christian theological tradition, and life experience keep her faith in constant motion.

But this growth can be painful because absolutes are comforting.

Thomas expected death, the final absolute, to have the last word, and when he discovered it didn't he had to change his way of thinking. So do we. As we grow into thinking, doubting, faithful people, old beliefs yield to new, more mature, and more nuanced and difficult understandings. Certitudes give way to ambiguity, which in turn gives birth to wisdom.

So too with institutions. As members of a church we are identified with an institution that once sanctioned slavery and refused to ordain women but has reversed course on both issues and is the richer for it. The church, and therefore its members, weans itself from naïve assumptions and confesses its sins. And it does all this because it has been willing to ask hard questions about the place of the church in the world and the place of God in the church.²

And if we are to continue down this path, it will be in large part because we're willing to ask difficult questions. Because to be open to questions, to new understandings, to doubt the old ways, means shedding old beliefs that once fit, that may have been held quite dear, but have since been outgrown.

Thomas is indispensable to us because he was one of the last people to see the resurrected Jesus walk the earth. Who among us would not welcome the opportunity to "see in his hands the print of the nails?" Thomas had to see in order to believe. We don't have that luxury. We must make do without sight, must find our way in the darkness and not be overwhelmed by it, must question stale prejudices and be daring enough to assume uncomfortable and even unpopular ways of thinking.

But there's one last reason Thomas is indispensable, and it's an important lesson to learn. Thomas, despite his doubts, was still out there looking, still open to the possibility that Jesus would return.

Immanuel Kant warned that doubt is a place of rest, not a place of residence. Doubt calls us to action, not just to agitation. There is a

² Kolbell, p. 150.

difference between doubting and disenchantment, between wrestling with faith and flinging faith to the winds. Thomas voiced his serious doubts about Jesus' miraculous return. But he continued to remain in the midst of the company of the disciples. When Jesus healed the demon-possessed child in Mark 9:24, the overjoyed father exclaimed, "I believe, help my unbelief." Faith lives hand in hand with doubt by continuing to worship God and by continuing to pray to God, despite doubt's presence.

So don't let your doubts plug up the channels to God. Let doubts open the channels in new and fresh directions as they have never been opened before.

Because again and again Jesus comes to us where we are, startling us and breathing on us and sending us out to be the embodied hope for others. Like Thomas, we can miss the moment if we are so intent on proving God or playing God or pushing God that we don't actually ponder the presence of God. We can gather in community, joined by our common fear and our common vulnerability. As the resurrected body of Christ in the world we can experience God, and then become together what we can never be alone.

The Good News of the gospel is clear. When we least expect him, and when we most need him, Jesus just appears. Even when we doubt. May it always be so. *(Susan Andrews, Christian Century Magazine)*

Amen.