

Between Belief and Doubt

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This pericope, this story, starts after the Resurrection, and the disciples have heard from the women. “Jesus is alive. Jesus is risen. We have seen him.” Yet, the disciples are still in hiding. They are still afraid. And Jesus helps them out a little by showing up and saying, “Hey, I’m here. It’s true. I’m alive. I am risen.” Granted, this is a very loose paraphrase of what he actually said.

It’s pretty easy to believe, when what you thought was unbelievable is standing right in front of you. It’s pretty easy to believe in the Resurrection when the person, the teacher, the rabbi you followed for so long, whom you thought was dead, shows up in the flesh and says, “Hi! It’s me! Believe! Here’s the Holy Spirit.”

It’s a little harder to believe when the last thing you saw was Jesus on the cross, nailed to that cross. When you may have heard him say, “It is finished.” Then watched as the life left his battered body. Even if you watched while hiding in the crowd or from a distance.

Then the women and all of your closest friends are telling you that this thing happened and you’re thinking – this is Thomas’ perspective – I know how death works. You don’t come back from death. You certainly don’t come back from that death.

It’s a truth about our human existence. Those things that we see are easier to believe. Yet, even sometimes when we do see something, we go, “Uh-uh, that ain’t right.” Even sometimes when we’re presented with evidence, we look at it and shake our heads and say, “Um... No. No, can’t be true.”

My Dad, Papa Tom, does this with airplanes... and he spent twenty years in the Airforce. To this day, he can look up in the sky, see a plane flying way overhead, or better yet, be on the plane, and not be able to wrap his head around how something that big and made of metal can stay airborne for hours. You can try to teach him all you want about aerodynamics. It doesn’t matter. It still defies all logic for him.

How much are we expecting Thomas, who has no evidence, who was not in the room when Jesus appeared to the others, to believe in what he has not seen? Still, his friends are asking him to believe. He replies, “I’m not going to believe until I can see it for myself. Until I can touch Jesus for myself. Until I can put my fingers on the scars on his hands and on his side.”

Which makes for very interesting pictures; Thomas always leaning down in like a half bow, kind of irreverently poking Jesus wounds, “Yeah, that’s definitely a hole.”

I always think, and maybe it’s just because I share his name, that Thomas got a bad rap. Can you really blame the guy for doubting? Can you blame the guy for not believing? I mean, his whole world view and the foundation of all his hopes was just shattered.

But then there’s also Thomas’ loyalty. Sure, at this point in the story Thomas is saying, “Uh-uh, No, I don’t believe it. I don’t care if I have 13... 14... 15 witnesses. I don’t believe it.” Yet, if we

turn the story back a little bit... If we go to the beginning of John, chapter 11, we see a different portrait of Thomas. We talked about this earlier in Lent. This is the chapter where Jesus hears his friend Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha, is sick, and they want him to come back to Bethany. Jesus waits two days. Jesus receives this news and is like, "Alright, yep, Lazarus is sick. We got some stuff to do here. We'll leave in two days, and we'll come see you all."

After those two days, Jesus says, "Ok, let's go back to Bethany in Judea." When Jesus said he wanted to head back to Bethany, this was the first response of the disciples:

"“But rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago, the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?””

I can picture the disciples. They've been in this spot. They've seen threats coming against Jesus; very physical, violent threats. The point of stoning someone is to kill them, right then and there, on the spot. So they're trying to give him a warning. They're saying, "Jesus, whoa, wait, wait, stop. Jesus, wait. Wait. Stay here where it's safe. Are you sure you wanna do that? Are you sure you wanna tempt fate?"

Jesus answers by giving them a cryptic message about walking in the light. He followed that up with a comment that Lazarus was asleep, which they didn't understand of course. After Jesus explains that Lazarus has died, in verse 16, we see a glimpse of the depth of Thomas' loyalty.

"Then Thomas, also known as Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us go that we may die with him.”"

In that moment, Thomas has heard the disciples. He has heard Jesus. He has heard what is going on, and what the possible threats of the situation may be, and he says, "Let's go. I'm with this guy. Jesus says, "It's time to go," we follow." That is amazing loyalty. Thomas in the face of this uncertainty, has the attitude of, "We might be going into a situation where people might want to stone Jesus again, and by association, probably stone us. Bring it on."

That doesn't sound like a man who's doubting, does it? That sounds like a man who has faith; like a man who believes in the cause that Jesus is promoting so much, he has no hesitation. "Alright," he says, "I'm with you. Let's go. Let's go experience life... or the end of life, together."

Then, in this moment, in today's Scripture reading, hearing the disciples' extraordinary tale... "Ehhh... I don't believe you. I simply do not believe you."

It's interesting, one of the comments the evangelist author of John makes, is that Thomas is also known as Didymus. A name that means twin. Hmm... Twin... two... two sides. Like two sides of a shekel... or two sides of a coin.

How many of us have two sides... or more?

Ok! We have some very self-aware people. I love it!

You all are in church right now. You're presenting one face; the faithful, worshipful, child of God face. That's good, that's holy, that's right.

I know for a fact – and I am probably one of them (I am one of them. No probably about it) – when people leave worship this morning, there will be another face presented. It's easy to teach and preach here. You all are a receptive audience. That's what the role is here. It's a little harder to be pastoral in a world that doesn't always appreciate kindness, or truth, or Christian love. Or does not trust Christian love because of how the love of Christ has been portrayed, misrepresented, and misused.

We all have two sides. Thomas had two sides. They were loyalty and doubt. And you know what? We need both. A faith journey is a journey of both loyalty and doubt, belief and questioning.

We're going to explore this idea of "both belief and questioning" some more during the Summer. I'll be doing a Summer sermon series, and I'm going to ask for your all's help in that. (Yes, this is a plug for what's coming up.) I'm going to ask for your suggestions. What is a passage in Scripture you have trouble with? What is a faith dilemma you're struggling with. Write those down on a sermon suggestion card and drop it in the box. Challenge me, and we'll get some preaching going on those topics. We'll see where God and Spirit are leading us. We'll see if we can shine some light into the doubt and some belief into the questions.

Back to Thomas...

Like I said, I don't blame him. In the whole story of Jesus there was loyalty from all the disciples. On the flipside though, there was abandonment in the Garden of Gethsemane. There is belief that is carried up to a certain point, and then there is doubt. There is hope, so much hope, in the Gospel... and on the reverse of hope's coin there is fear. How do we operate within this reality of duality.

Even the way we understand our faith in the Methodist Church is double-sided. We have four "tests," let's say. We look at our practice of faith; of how to operate as Christians in the world, by looking at Scripture first. Scripture is primary. What does the Bible say? We look at Tradition. What has the Church done in the past? How have we operated as a people of faith?

If we're looking at this like a coin, the next two "tests" can be seen as the reverse of the faith coin. On the reverse there is Reason. Let's think through what Scripture and Tradition offer. It is faith informed by logic. The last "test" is Experience. We ask, what has the world shown us? What has been our life's reality and how does it speak to a journey of faith? How do we journey in all of this?

I say all of this because I want to point out one thing. The question of, "Why do you doubt?" is not a question of blame. It's not a question meant to make you feel guilty. It's not a question that points out sin. It's a question of nourishment and searching.

Why do you doubt? We could also ask, "Why don't you trust?" Better yet, we could ask, "What is preventing you from trusting?" Or we could ask, "What are you seeking?" "Why do you doubt?" is never a question of shame. It's a question that says, "Let's journey together."

Thomas, in that moment of doubting, made known exactly what he needed to help him understand what was going on. The disciples didn't know what was going on any better than Thomas did. All they knew was they had seen Jesus alive. Thomas didn't have that proof. He's saying, "If you want me to believe, then I need to see the same thing that you saw. If you want me to trust and believe in this, I need my spirit fed as much as you all had your spirit fed. I need to experience this wonder of God as much as you have experienced this wonder of God."

That is a good and holy place to be, where you are seeking, where you are searching, where you want to know God, where you want to experience God. Thomas didn't say, "I'm not having any of it." Thomas said, "I wanna see what you saw. I wanna know what you know. I want to experience what you experienced."

When we go out into the world and try to proclaim Jesus and gospel-hope and joy and peace and all of these wonderful things that we testify God can do for the world, and has done for us, how are we proclaiming that? Are we proclaiming it in ways that get a response of, "I doubt that." Or are we proclaiming it in ways where people say, "I see something in you. I see something I want."?

When I was driving for Uber, I would have some of the most profound theological conversations with my passengers. Usually, it was with the people who just walked out of the bar. And that's ok. Sometimes you need to be in an enlightened or altered state of mind. But one conversation I had, with a totally sober woman, was about her career, which she loved. She was a professional who went into different corporations and created systems to doublecheck and backcheck and keep in order all of the security needs of the company she was consulting with. That's important work, especially in this day and age of everyone wanting their information kept safe and private and unable to be hacked. That's good and needed work in our technological cyberspace-based society.

But what made it amazing to me was the passion with which she talked about her work. By the end of that 20-or-so minute drive, I was ready to hang up my pulpit robe, resign from preaching, and say, "How do I get your job?" I didn't, but it was tempting.

It's that passion, though. It's the hope and the light within us; something we can emit, and we can see it in each other when those spirit passions are stoked. The thing is, we gotta do it with more than words. We gotta do it with more than, "the Bible says." If we try that line on someone who has never seen or read the Bible, or places no value on Scripture, it means nothing. We look at someone whose needs we can help meet, that's where we make the connection.

If we wanna help relieve doubt, or help people who doubt the possibility of there being something truly good, kind, or even miraculous in the world? First thing to remember is *don't shame the doubt*. Second of all, see all of that person and what their story is. What are they seeking? Why do they doubt? What is causing the hesitation? How can we help bring them to a place where they can see God at work in the world... where they might even join God at work in the world? How do we witness to the Thomases?

Jesus gave us the code. Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Give medicine to the sick. Visit those in prison. Offer shelter to the shelterless. See people where they are for who they are, not who we might perceive them as or who we think they should be. See people as God sees people. We are all children who need to be loved. We are all human beings who need to experience something holy and good in our lives. And then we journey together.

If we look in the book of Acts, Jesus stayed for 40 days before he ascended to heaven. Jesus continued the journey with the people. People believed. The Church grew. Jesus sent the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Then we get the places in Scripture where we read, “and the Church added to their number every day.”

If we want that to be our reality today, then we journey with people. We show them – not tell them – show them the love of God with both sides of the coin. That means being vulnerable, even showing our own doubt, as we journey together in faith.

In Jesus name, Amen.