

“Believing: The Heart of the Gospel”

John 20:19-29

I read a story once of a young boy, a minister's son, who was out playing in the yard. When his mother called him in for lunch, he headed straight to the table and reached hungrily for his sandwich. But his mother scolded him by saying, “Go wash your hands first, they are covered in germs.” The boy was heard to mutter under his breath, “Germs and Jesus. Germs and Jesus. That’s all I ever hear about in THIS house and I’VE NEVER SEEN EITHER ONE!”

Aren’t we a lot like that little boy – doubting things that we cannot see, questioning God’s existence when it is all too evident? It is easy to remember God’s greatness at this time of year when spring is all around us. But will we be able to see Him in the bleak January days when there are no leaves on the trees or flowers blooming? Or even when we turn on the six o’clock news? In the midst of the blessings of life, do we like the wandering Israelites, question God’s plan for us when we cannot see the outcome.

The people who lived at the time that John wrote his Gospel faced a similar dilemma. Although John's Gospel is believed by many to be the only eyewitness account of Jesus and his ministry, it was also the last gospel written. While the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke were all written between 40-50 A.D., it is believed that John did not pen his memories of Jesus until close to the year 100 A.D., almost seventy years after the crucifixion of Christ.

That meant that a child of six at the time of Jesus' death would be well into her seventies when reading or hearing John's words. Therefore, John was addressing many people who had never seen or heard of Jesus Christ. To some, John's words about the teachings of the Messiah probably seemed legendary at best.

That is why the story of Thomas must have been so important to the people of John's day. When they had doubts or feelings of abandonment or wondered where in the world their savior was, they would have found comfort knowing that even one of Christ's chosen disciples shared the same emotions.

For reasons that are not given to us, Thomas was not present with the disciples when Jesus visited them in the house where they were hiding after his crucifixion. So when his brothers reported that they had encountered the resurrected Christ, his response was, "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."

Because of this reaction, Thomas is known as doubting Thomas, which I think is rather unfortunate. After all, there is at least one occasion when Thomas showed faith that the other disciples did not. When Jesus announced that Lazarus had died so that others would come to believe in him, only Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Minister Barbara Brown Taylor says of Thomas' doubts, "He was a brave and literal-minded maverick who could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after he had convinced himself that it WAS the right thing." And let's be honest, how many of US would believe in the resurrection of someone if WE had not seen.

So basically we are really no different than the folks that John wrote to. In fact, we are even farther removed from hearing and seeing God in the flesh. That is why the

story of Thomas is such a gift too. So let's look together at the mistakes and virtues of Thomas and see what they say about OUR beliefs.

As I said earlier, we don't really know why Thomas wasn't there when the risen Christ reappeared to the disciples. Perhaps he was one who had the need to suffer the death of his Lord alone. Perhaps he was afraid of being with the other disciples – surely all of them probably felt that if Jesus could be crucified, they could as well. Whatever his reason, his absence is probably the gravest mistake that Thomas makes - that is, Thomas withdrew from Christian fellowship.

Everyone grieves differently. Just as we all rejoice differently. And being alone with our sorrow is an important part of healing. But if we shut ourselves off completely and refuse to share our grief with our brothers and sisters in Christ, it is almost like saying, "No help needed" to God. I say this because the Bible is clear that being the body of Christ, living and serving as the priesthood of all believers, is God's intention for us all. Jesus left us to one another and growing his church is not a one-man or one-woman show!

It is clear from the very first account of creation that God does not intend humankind to live solarity lives. God created Adam and gave him Eve as his mate and ordained the institution of marriage. He gave Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age to show the importance of family. He created a bond between David and Jonathan, son of David's enemy Saul, to show that sometimes friends can understand you when family cannot or that when we have no family, our friends can BECOME our family. Even Jesus Christ, our God made flesh, when he went to the Garden to pray, did not go alone. He asked Peter, James and John to go with him.

So it is clearly God's intent that we should live and work and worship in fellowship with one another. Despite my sticking up for Thomas before, I have to admit that if he had remained with the other disciples, he would have been present when Jesus came back and would not have needed a command performance.

But does some of the culpability for Thomas' lack of belief fall on the other disciples? When I mean is that since God has ordained that we live in fellowship, it is *our* Christian calling to take care of our brothers and sisters who must be away from the fold because of illness, age, handicap, grief or any situation that excludes them from physical presence with us. Perhaps if Thomas' brothers had been more in tuned to his needs, he would have had the opportunity to experience the resurrection with them. This is an important message for the church today.

However, I see some virtues in Thomas in this story that I admire also. First of all, Thomas refused to say that he understood when he did not. He was completely honest and showed no pretense. He was not going to accept something that made no sense at all. In a world of dishonesty from the corporate and political realms of today it is refreshing to hear someone say what they mean and stick to their guns. Not only would Thomas have to see, he would have to feel too, by sticking his hands in the wounds of Christ.

Also Thomas' need for certainty makes me question how sincere some of our worship is. Tennyson once said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." This begs the question: Do we come to strengthen our relationship with God by mindless repetition of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed or would we learn more about our God by thinking about what we are saying and

whether or not we really agree with it? I am not trying to discourage being a confessional church or using that perfect prayer left for us by God. But I am encouraging thoughtful discernment about whether each of us really believes something before we say it.

When I served as the Chaplain at Presbyterian Community, there was a lady there who had been both a businesswoman and a writer in her working years. She was very well traveled and extremely involved in her home church in many ways – even volunteering in the office one day a week. So I assumed she was an Elder and approached her to help serve Communion.

She said she had been asked several times but always turned down the invitation and when I asked her why she said, "There is one line of the Apostles' Creed that I just don't believe. So I didn't think I could really serve with any integrity." I always admired her so much for that. Would that we all were so intentional about our actions matching our words.

The other thing I really admire in Thomas is that when he was sure of what he believed, he went all the way. When Thomas finally encountered his Risen Lord, he cried out immediately, "My Lord and my God!" His surrender to certainty was complete and he offers us a perfect but simple statement of faith. So although Thomas was unbelieving he was not faithless and was determined to keep seeking his God until he could claim what he believed with clarity and assurance. If today's Christians could express their joy and faith in Christ so completely and sincerely, we would be winning souls to Christ every day.

And let us not ignore the reaction of Jesus to Thomas because that is a gift to us too. Jesus Christ did not admonish or criticize Thomas for his doubts. He did not judge

Thomas for living apart – perhaps that is why he reminded his disciples not to judge others for their sins so they wouldn't be too hard on Thomas either. God calls us to believe and share our belief with everyone. How others respond to what we share is between them and God.

Although Jesus DID proclaim a special blessing for those who can believe WITHOUT seeing, he made it clear that it doesn't matter how you COME to believe as long as you do. Jesus beckons each one of us to see and feel in whatever way will lead us to his salvation. He offers us his grace freely and yearns for us to accept it and live in fellowship with him. But in the end, it is clear that believing is at the heart of accepting and sharing the Gospel.

I suppose we will always remember Thomas for his doubts. Perhaps that will comfort us all because when you think about it honestly, Christianity is a strange mixture of faith and doubt. But the truth in this story is that, in the end, God provided a way for Thomas to come back to his beliefs. God calls us all to be the body of Christ, to work and worship and laugh and cry and share and suffer together so that the body will grow. God even calls us to celebrate his Holy meal of body and blood TOGETHER – as a church family – and not as individuals. Communion, by its very name. And so the story of Thomas teaches us that we are called to build one another up so that we can respond in faith others doubt until they, too, can claim the heart of the Gospel as their own.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.