

2 Easter                      John 20:19-31  
Christ and Grace          April 8, 2018  
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I like Thomas. And like Thomas I have a lot of questions! Maybe it's my scientific background, but this passage raises more questions than it answers. When I read scripture, I like to look for what is missing, what is not said, what seems contradictory, or what I do not understand. This text is full of things like that to explore! And Thomas does just that. He's not listed as the patron saint of scientists, but maybe he should be!

In John's gospel, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and when she recognized him she went to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" But when it was evening on that day, that very same day, we find the disciples locked in fear behind closed doors. Now the text says they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, but my guess is that they were just as afraid of the future. What would happen to them now that things had suddenly changed and Jesus was no longer with them? What were they going to do now? And were they next on the list to be captured and crucified?

And as they sat there with fear and anxiety churning in their stomachs, Jesus appeared. It did not matter that they had locked the door; there he was, right there with them in the midst of their fear, saying "Peace be with you" as he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side.

And in the presence of Jesus the risen Lord, the disciples moved from fear to joy, and they began to believe. But Jesus did not intend for them to remain in the house full of peace and joy. Nope! His next words to them were "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus commissions the community to go out, to continue doing all that the Father had sent him to do, loving, serving, and forgiving others. And then Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

But... there was a disciple missing that evening... Thomas. I think it's worth noting that he was *not* locked in the house in fear. We have no way of knowing what Thomas was doing, but for all we know he was out looking for evidence, as any good scientist would. Perhaps Thomas needed some time to come to believe when the disciples said, "We have seen the Lord!" Were any of the disciples really fully able to believe at this point? Was Thomas doubting any more than the other disciples?

In John's Gospel, the meaning of "to believe" (always a verb not noun in John) is a fundamental openness of heart, the basic readiness to see and hear what is really there, to trust that our experiences, no matter how frightening or costly they appear to be, are part of our coming to believe. To believe in Jesus is to accept him, to follow him, and to grow in relationship with him. Belief is active, not static.

A week later, Jesus again appeared to the disciples, and this time Thomas was there. Notice that the disciples are still behind closed doors. So we see how this whole believing thing is not instantaneous but takes some practice! Jesus again says, "Peace be with you" and then he addresses Thomas. He does not rebuke him or praise him...but instead, Jesus invites him to move beyond his unbelief, he invites Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and side.

Jesus gives Thomas what Thomas needs in order to believe, and Thomas can then go out in the world and proclaim, “My Lord and my God!” The wonderful good news is that Jesus meets us where we are.... because each of us comes to believe differently... by hearing the story, hearing a personal testimony, a sermon, or a prayer. Our belief can be increased and strengthened as we receive the holy food and drink from the communion table, as we feed the hungry, and share with others what we have been given.

Belief in its highest form sounds like the early Church we heard about in Acts – all believing with one heart and soul, generously sharing their possessions, and giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. If that passage from Acts about selling possessions and sharing with the community is difficult to hear, and for many of us it is, then perhaps we are more like Thomas than we first thought.

Like the disciples, we have come together as a community of believers. We too experience fear, or times when we might not believe one another or believe all that Jesus has promised. Thomas did not leave the community when he did not agree with them, when he could not believe in the same way; he took the time he needed and he questioned... and...this is important... the community listened to and supported Thomas. Together they worked through their fears and questions. And then they left the locked room of fear and doubt. Together.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says that it’s not doubt but rather certainty that is the opposite of faith. Doubt, or unbelieving, means that you are in an active, dynamic relationship to an idea. Certainty means you are done thinking about it, no longer open to hearing a new thing. There is something sacred about doubt because if we stay with it, then we are working together, in community, as we move toward believing.

When we were here last week celebrating Easter, most of us could believe, if only for a day, in the amazing power of the Resurrection. But the events of daily life often pull us back into our locked rooms of fear and unbelief. Our lives are filled with all sorts of things we could worry about – what fear do you have that keeps you up at night?

And as a faith community, we have some fears and worries as well. Whether we are figuring out how to fund the restoration of all these exquisite stained glass windows, renovate the roof, or install new carpet - fear sometimes has a way of paralyzing us, keeping us locked in old thought patterns. We want to maintain this beautiful building that is a gift from God and from those who came before us, so that it will be here for our children and grandchildren and generations to come. Yet we also know we are called to go out of the building to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, to touch with healing hands those things in this world that wound Jesus.

How do we live in that tension? What do we do next that is a faithful response to what God has already given us and what God calls us to do next? Maybe being Thomas is not such a bad thing after all. Maybe as we doubt and question our challenges together, as we worship, study and pray, we will hear a new thing that will move us toward believing that God is in the midst of it all.

For the disciples and for us, what empowers us to overcome fear and nudges us out of our locked rooms and mindsets is the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathes on us, filling us with his life giving Spirit. It's this power of the Spirit that moves us forward, sends us out, motivates our generosity, and helps us believe that we can accomplish all that God has given us to do. Jesus knows we need reminders and he will meet us where we are. He had to speak peace three times in this passage alone to his disciples!

Pray that we may have the grace to be open to the power of the Spirit, that we too will be able to exclaim, "We have seen the Lord!" Amen.