

DOUBTS AND DOORS

When 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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A 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." Then 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

(John 20:19-29, NRSV)

When I was a kid, I used to drive my parents and sister crazy on long car trips by reading aloud from what I considered to be fascinating books. I loved almanacs, *The Guinness Book of World Records*, *The Book of Lists*, and *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. I was enthralled with the entries about the man whose fingernails were several feet long, and the person who hiccupped for more than a year. And I never tired of sharing my enthusiasm with my captive audience on those car trips. In so many ways it reminds me of preaching a sermon—me talking, captive audience.... Anyway one of the things I loved most about these books was their indisputable nature. I could speak on these topics with authority, as surely as if I had been the person taking a measuring tape to those fingernails. These facts were outrageous and intriguing all at the same time. Of course, some people will argue anything. These are the Doubting Thomases of the world. Dating back to the famous disciple's doubts about the resurrection, a Doubting Thomas is someone who's cynical or lacking in faith. However, when we examine more closely the original Doubting Thomas of biblical fame, we just might arrive at a more flattering conclusion.

The Gospel of John mentions Thomas three times. When we examine all three passages, we get a fuller picture of him. As I was preparing today's sermon, I was surprised to learn that Thomas was not a man of idle words, but a man of action. For instance, in the story from John, chapter 11, Jesus' good friend Lazarus dies. Jesus asks his disciples to go with him to Bethany in order to comfort Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. The disciples were visibly upset by his request. The last time they were in Bethany, the religious leaders had threatened to stone Jesus. Understandably, the disciples feared for their safety, but Thomas spoke up, saying, "Let us also go [to

Bethany with Jesus], that we may die with him.” Here was a man who would rather die a faithful follower of Christ than live with a cowardly faith. Instead of “Doubting Thomas” why don’t we call him “Courageous Thomas?”

Not only was Thomas a courageous man, he was honest with himself and others. A few chapters later in John chapter 14, Jesus is talking with his disciples about Heaven and says: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And *you know the way* where I am going” (vv. 2-4). At this point Thomas interjects and says in all honesty that he for one doesn’t have a clue as to what Jesus is talking about. “Lord,” Thomas says, “we don’t know where you are going so how can we know the way?” In response to his forthright question, Jesus answers Thomas with one of the most memorable verses in the entire Bible when he says, “*I am* the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (v. 6). If Thomas hadn’t risked looking foolish in front of the other disciples, we may have been without these important words that have challenged and guided the church for centuries. So I wonder, instead of “Doubting Thomas,” why don’t we call him “Honest Thomas?”

The next story involving Thomas in John’s gospel appears in today’s scripture lesson. At first the significance lies in Thomas’ absence, not his presence. The setting is Easter evening. Ten of Jesus’ original twelve disciples were gathered together, mourning their tragic loss. Guilt-ridden Judas had killed himself. But Thomas was absent too, and we don’t know why. Sometime earlier Mary Magdalene had told the ten her astonishing news: Jesus had been resurrected, appearing to her outside the tomb. John doesn’t tell us how the disciples responded, but we can figure it out from their actions. They remained fearfully assembled in a room behind locked doors. In Luke’s gospel, we read that the disciples regarded the resurrection as merely an “idle tale.”

Why were they laying low under lock and key? Probably because they figured that those who crucified Jesus might be after them next. Despite the locked doors, Jesus appeared to the disciples. They knew it was Jesus because he showed them his wounded hands and feet. He offered them a message of peace and gave them the gift of his Holy Spirit. He then commissioned them to go as healers into the broken world. And then as quickly as he appeared among them he disappeared, leaving them wide eyed and open-mouthed.

Like the disciples, we often find ourselves bolted behind doors we think are secure. We find a comfortable place to lock the terrible world outside; when at the same time we may be locking God out too. But we can never really lock God out of our lives anymore than we can lock away the pain and sadness that touch each and every human life. Like Jesus miraculously appearing to his fainthearted disciples, God moves through our locked doors to offer words of comfort and challenge. Certainly God offers us comfort to face the trials that come our way, but God does not want us to stay locked behind the doors of fear. God’s challenge is that we throw open the doors of fear with a heart of faith. And in time the disciples did that, each and every one of them. They all

moved beyond those fearful doors into a hostile world to boldly proclaim and live the good news of Jesus Christ.

But what about Thomas? Where was he and what was he doing? Wherever he was, Thomas was not present for Christ's miraculous appearance to the ten. When the disciples met up with him later on they explained the incredible turn of events. But Thomas shook his head in disbelief saying, "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (20:25, NEB). Can we really blame him for not believing? For all he knew his fellow disciples were deluded or drunk, so why should he take their word for such a seemingly impossible tale? Was it that the story sounded untrue, or that the story sounded too good to be true? For whatever reason, Thomas wanted tangible evidence. He would not be duped. He would not be taken advantage of. He had to see to believe, period.

Like the disciples who locked themselves in their hiding place, perhaps Thomas locked his heart to the possibility of a miracle. Thomas loved Jesus with all his heart and was surely crushed when Jesus died—his hopes and dreams dying up there on the cross right alongside his leader and friend. In his internal anguish, Thomas may have shut his heart's door and thrown away the key. Maybe he told himself to forget the past and move on. But his attitude changed when Jesus burst through the doors of Thomas' heart in yet another miraculous appearance. This time, Jesus appeared before both Thomas and the other disciples, and told Thomas to touch his nail-scarred hands and spear-scarred side. Thomas casts aside his doubts once and for all responding, "My Lord and my God." This is the only place in scripture where someone speaking to Jesus refers to him as God. Thus, Doubting Thomas provides us with a unique glimpse into the true nature of Jesus Christ. Instead of calling him "Doubting Thomas," why don't we call him "Insightful Thomas?"

Obviously "Doubting Thomas" has prevailed. And why should we be surprised? So often we judge people based on sound bytes instead of entire stories. We hear one negative tale and judge the person once and for all. But we shouldn't judge people on the basis of one mistake. As a matter of fact, we shouldn't judge them at all. Jesus said, "Judge not that you be not judged."

Of course, we all want to sort out the good guys from the bad guys. We want to separate our enemies from our friends. This seems sensible. But we must remember that Jesus told us to love our enemies as well as our friends. And we can't love people when our most basic desire is to get all the dirt on them we can. We need to give the Thomases of the world the benefit of the doubt, viewing all people through eyes of compassion and responding with Christ-like love.

For when Thomas admitted his doubts, Jesus didn't chastise him or make light of the situation. Rather, Jesus appeared to him and gave him the chance to see for himself. Jesus compassionately showed his wounds and his love.

Indeed, Jesus made a habit of giving second chances. Take Peter, who vehemently denied Jesus three times on that dreadful night before his crucifixion. Later, when Peter encounters Jesus in the famous scene on the beach, he encounters not a turned back but the open arms of forgiveness. Then there's Zacchaeus, the tax collecting cheat who robbed his own people on behalf of the occupying Roman government. Jesus responds to him not with condemnation, but with a dinner invitation, blowing his mind and changing his heart. And there's the Samaritan woman at the well. A woman tarnished with a bad reputation. Yet Jesus doesn't shun her. He offers her a drink of living water. He treats her as a human being, and she discovers that this kind man is the Messiah. Time and time again, people knew there was something special about Jesus because of his kindness, his forgiveness, his love. And they responded by changing their ways.

It is important to note that Jesus isn't the only one giving second chances. Thomas gives Jesus another chance too. He could have run away. He could have refused to believe. But instead, Thomas chooses to seek God despite his lingering questions. He faces Jesus, reaches out, and responds, "My Lord and my God."

Tradition tells us that after this encounter Thomas eventually became a missionary to India. One source puts it this way: "[The] Lord called Thomas to go to a country foreign to him to preach the good news to people who spoke another language and lived in a very different manner than the one to which he was accustomed. Thomas went before kings and fearlessly told them of an even greater king to whom they must learn to be servants. He spoke to outcasts and told them of an outcast named Jesus who died so that they might know they are children of a great king. He described to them a spiritual teacher who washed his disciples' feet, something they could not imagine even with tremendous effort. Such a teacher was never known among them before" (*The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, Vol. 10*, p. 185).

Thomas is credited with founding the first Christian church in India. He died a martyr's death, serving his Lord in Edessa on the Syrian border (*The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, p. 1049).

Regardless of what we've heard about old "Doubting Thomas," he was a man of courage, of insight, and of faith. Did he harbor honest doubts? Yes. But after all he had seen, could we blame him? And in the end, Thomas' faith overcomes his fears when he meets the risen Lord face to face.

We all have our doubts at some point in life. Doubt per se is not a sin. Wondering, questioning, and searching for truth are noble endeavors. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, "There lives more faith in honest doubt...than in half the creeds" (*Homiletics, vol. 10 no. 2*, pp. 67-68). Minister David Yeager writes, "Faith is a belief held in the presence of doubt rather than a belief that removes all doubt" (*Ibid.* p. 64). And on a lighter note, Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner writes, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 20).

Some doubts are overcome with time. Others may never be resolved. But we must struggle to live with our questions in the midst of our faith. And we must continue to seek God and serve the world. Sometimes our doubts tempt us to behave like the disciples who hid behind locked doors, shutting out God and devaluing our faith. But even there, God can appear in unexpected ways and draw us, like Thomas, onward and upward in a life of faithful service. As St. Augustine said, "Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand." AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
Edited by Colleen Brown Only
May 4, 2003
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of ceaseless new beginnings, we rejoice that through your powerful love Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. In the resurrection you have shown that neither trouble nor persecution, hardship nor poverty, danger nor death can separate us from your love. Free us to trust in you that we may live in the confidence of your children. In the resurrection you were victorious over injustice, violence, and oppression. Free us to risk ourselves in the struggle for justice and peace that we may be your partners in restoring all creation to your will. In the resurrection you have opened the gates of eternal life. Free us from the fear of death that we may serve you with courage. In the resurrection you bring new possibilities out of hopeless situations. Free us from all despair that we may bring your hope to those who have lost heart. Through the presence of Jesus Christ among us, draw us into a community of freedom, hope, and love. Work your new creation among us that we may serve you without fear.

Through Jesus Christ our risen Savior. AMEN.

(adapted from *Book of Worship United Church of Christ*, p. 497)