

“A Healthy Skepticism”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
April 23, 2006
Scripture: John 20:19-31

Back in the 1960's, there was a famous phrase – “never trust anyone older than 30.” In the 1600's, philosopher Rene Descartes said, “Dubito ergo cogito; cogito ergo sum,” from the Latin, “I doubt, therefore I think; I think therefore I am.” Mark Twain is famous for quoting a schoolboy who said that faith “is believing what you know ain't so.” There is an old Arabian proverb that says, “trust in Allah, but tie your camel.”¹ And after the first Easter, Thomas the disciple said, “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.”

Doubting Thomas. Poor Thomas – the disciple who was out running errands when Jesus first appeared to the whole gang of disciples. Easter Day, as lived by Doubting Thomas. Oh, they had already heard rumors. But what did those women know, the ones who heard the message at the tomb? Wishful thinking – if it were only so, he must have thought. Maybe Thomas was just a practical guy – you know, no need to get too emotional about this. Or perhaps he thought, the women are already delusional and, grieving or not, the twelve of us are still going to need to eat – I might as well go out and get some groceries.

Things were a little murky in those first days after Easter. Last week we heard how Mark's gospel ended, with three women going to the tomb, and meeting a man dressed in white, telling them that Jesus was no longer there, that he had risen, and that they should go and tell the other disciples, but they told no one. The fact that the four gospels in our Bible all tell the Easter story a bit differently is a first clue that things were unclear to those first eyewitnesses.

Think of a fast-breaking news story. What just happened? How did you hear it? Who told you this? Did you hear that so and so was there when it happened? It is not terribly difficult for us to understand how this life-changing news was relayed in a rather fluid manner. Think back to a major news event that happened during your lifetime. 9/11, the space shuttle disasters, Kennedy's assassination, Pearl Harbor. There may be a difference here in that these are all tragic accidents and I want to come back to doubting Thomas and the resurrection. But hang with me for another minute. With that major news moment, let me ask - from whom did you hear the news? How did you react? Did you express any disbelief? Did you doubt the news?

Thomas had been out of the room when their whole world changed. So 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.”

I was in Wilmington, Delaware on a bright Tuesday morning, leading a staff worship service prior to our weekly meeting when someone rushed in and said a plane had crashed on purpose into the world trade center in New York. I said, “No, no - I already heard that news and they thought it was a small plane that had had an accident.”

Thomas said to those who came rushing up to him with good news, and he said, no no, “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.” I think Thomas gets a bit of a bad rap.

Thomas Troeger, whom I consider to be an excellent preacher and writer once wrote:

These things did Thomas count as real:
The warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
The grain of wood, the heft of stone,
The last frail twitch of flesh and bone.

The vision of his skeptic mind
Was keen enough to make him blind
To any unexpected act
Too large for his small world of fact.²

This poem, and our tradition, seems awfully harsh on Thomas. When the gospel of John was first written, he was known as “the one called the twin.” But now, simply doubting Thomas – the bad guy, the skeptic, the doubter. Let me ask you this question. Are the other disciples doing much better at believing in this Easter thing? They had already seen the risen Christ, yet there they are - hiding behind locked doors! If the Easter message was the first incarnation of the advertising campaign “no fear,” then what in the world were they doing hiding behind locked doors rather than spreading the good news?!

Now this sermon is about faith and doubt, and I will be leading to contrasting blind certainty with healthy skepticism. But there is something that must be addressed briefly. John says that the disciples were hiding behind locked doors “because of the Jews.” Too much hatred and anti-Semitism has been condoned, excused, or justified as a result of statements like this in the Gospel of John. While it is difficult to fully defend John’s version of the story against these charges, some historical background is helpful. I always begin by saying that Jesus was a Jew. The disciples were Jewish. Later followers who worshipped the risen Christ thought they were expressing the real Judaism. Only later, after the separation between Judaism and Christianity was clear, was John written. And so the “religious leaders” of the other gospels, who along with the political leaders, had Jesus arrested and executed become called in John’s gospel, simply “the Jews.” We who live in a post-holocaust world must be ever-diligent in watching to ensure that Christian theology is not used in hateful and hurtful ways.

Ok – back to the main point for today. Doubting Thomas and what does it mean to have faith. Is it ok to doubt? How did Jesus get raised from the dead? What did he look like after he emerged from the tomb?

What I want to argue is that these are all valid questions. But first, back to the story. Jesus walked into the room, and gave his greeting. Shalom, peace be with you. Then, walking over to Thomas, he said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

And, without any mention of Thomas taking Jesus up on his offer to touch his wounds, Thomas answers, with the highest theological language available, “My Lord and my God!” For being such a doubter, Thomas sure seems to have a lot of faith!

Heather Murray Elkins wrote a poem called “The Younger Brother of Thomas.”
 Thomas really didn’t touch him.
 I would have.
 What can you prove by just looking?
 Since when is seeing believing? . . .
 And then this story starts:
 That Jesus isn’t dead,
 that he’s been seen
 walking through walls,
 showing up at supper time.
 But nobody, nobody had touched him.
 Thomas didn’t buy it.
 I wouldn’t have either.
 Never listen to an eyewitness.
 Get the facts firsthand.
 Don’t settle for someone
 you can’t get a hold of.
 But then this ghost or hoax appeared
 and called his name.
 Thomas took one look
 and thought he’d seen God.
 He really didn’t touch him, see.
 But doubting Thomas believes.
 It would take more than that
 to convince me.
 Doubting runs in the family.³

Doubting runs in the family. This story from the gospel of John is aimed at people like us, later listeners. Jesus’s concluding words are addressed as much to us as they are to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not yet seen, but have come to believe.” We are not eyewitnesses to the resurrection. We must wager our faith on the stories of those who have gone before us.

But faith is not absolute certainty. When I was a young kid, my favorite theologian was the author Madeleine L’Engle. And I was shaped early on from a scene from her book *A Ring of Endless Light*. She told of a teenager named Leo, grieving the death of his father. And his friend Vicki remembered that he had been on a religious kick and had been telling people exactly what God is like, when her Grandfather, a minister, had said quietly, “As St. Augustine says: If you

think you understand, it isn't God." And Vicki was glad that in the midst of his grief he would not think his father's death was something God had planned or intended and that it was wrong to be sad.⁴ Questioning God is as much a part of faith as praying.

Daniel Migliore wrote in his seminal textbook of introductory Christian theology.

When faith no longer frees people to ask the hard questions, it becomes inhuman and dangerous. Unquestioning faith soon slips into ideology, superstition, fanaticism, self-indulgence, and idolatry. Faith seeks understanding passionately and relentlessly, or it languishes and eventually dies. If faith raises ever new questions, then the theological task of the Christian community is to pursue these questions, to keep them alive, to prevent them from being forgotten or suppressed. Human life ceases to be human not when we do not have all the answers but when we no longer have the courage to ask the really important questions.⁵

The essence of human life is to boldly ask the really important questions. Faith must seek understanding passionately and relentlessly or die. Paul Tillich said, doubt is not the opposite of faith but an element of faith itself. Another church I served had the motto, "we don't claim to know all the answers, but together we try to ask the right questions." Our Reformed tradition values a thinking faith that embraces questions. Dorothy Parker once wrote, "four be the things I'd have been better without: love, curiosity, freckles, and doubt." For some of us, doubt is just as much a reality as freckles. Curiosity naturally goes hand in hand with doubt.

For those here who are teenagers – members of our confirmation class or the youth orchestra - I hope you remember this one thing. It is okay to ask tough questions about your faith. In fact, if you are to be a faithful person, you must ask tough questions about who God is and who you are. The church can and should support you in asking tough questions.

For parents, remember that faith must seek understanding passionately and relentlessly. Encourage exploration and curiosity. Model asking tough questions about the world we live in and the God we trust.

For those in later years, it is okay to express doubt and fear – even the disciples, those who were closest to Jesus show their doubt and fear in this story.

This story is not so much about Doubting Thomas, but about Jesus. For it seems that the real message of this story is that no matter how much doubt we have, no matter how afraid we are, no matter how many locks are on the door, Jesus can still come in and offer peace.

¹ www.en.thinkexist.com/quotations/doubt

² Thomas Troeger, "These Things Did Thomas Count as Real," *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 2* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995) 186.

³ Heather Murray Elkins, "The Younger Brother of Thomas" *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 2* 188.

⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, A Ring of Endless Light (Dell Publishing, 1980) 12.

⁵ Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 5