

Thomas The Bold, A sermon by Nathan Sobers
Community Presbyterian Church, Cathedral City, CA
April 23, 2017
John 20:19-31

¹⁹When 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." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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 hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then 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." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Welcome to Pastor-gets-a-day-off-and-the-seminary-student-gets-to-preach-Sunday! Otherwise known as Low Sunday or, officially, the second Sunday of Easter. I want to take a moment to thank Pastor Lee and the Session for the opportunity to bring God's word this morning. I'm truly grateful to be standing before you today.

In churches, such as ours which follow the Lectionary, this Sunday usually means that we hear the familiar story of Doubting Thomas. The challenge in preaching such a familiar text is finding a way to bring it to life, in a way that provides a fresh perspective. Hopefully, that will be the case in today's sermon.

In our Gospel text today, we are told that Thomas won't believe Jesus is risen, until he sees (and touches) for himself. We hear Jesus, in verse 29 of our Gospel reading, asking Thomas if he believes only because he's seen, and we hear Jesus going on to say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." While Jesus singles out Thomas, I think that this is aimed at all the disciples. History has, I believe, given Thomas a bum rap.

Think about it. It's the evening of the Resurrection. Despite the strong testimony of Mary Magdalene, which given the cultural context of the time was immediately discounted, the disciples are locked away in a room out of fear. It was only after Jesus appears and shows them his hands and side, that the disciples believe and rejoice.

The idea of resurrection would not have been a foreign concept to the people of Jesus's day, as we see in Isaiah 26:19 which says, "Your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy!" And in Daniel 12:2-3 we read: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt."

In fact, one of the major differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was over the resurrection of the physical body. The Pharisees believed in it while the Sadducees, who believed in Sheol, did not. Sheol, by the way, is defined by Robert Rainwater as "a place of darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life, a place of stillness and darkness cut off from life and from God".

So, even though resurrection was a common, if not universally held, religious view of the Jewish people, at that time, the disciples doubted that Jesus had risen. Thomas, however, is the only one of the disciples who had the courage to ask for proof.

Now this doesn't mean Thomas lacked faith in Jesus; quite the opposite, in fact. In John's telling of the Lazarus story, where Jesus is using Lazarus' death to foretell his own death, we read in John 11:16, that it's Thomas who exhorts the other disciples to "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

So, I don't believe it was a lack of faith which drove Thomas's doubt in the resurrection. After all, from a Sadducees point of view, it was logical, and indeed quite rational, to assume that people just didn't come back from the dead.

For us, who believe in the Resurrection but were not there to witness it first-hand, it's easy to focus on the "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" portion of this text. Yes, we believe Jesus was resurrected. It is the foundation of Christianity. Yes, we believe and yet we haven't seen and yes, we are blessed because of it. But...we all have doubts. Not necessarily about the resurrection itself, but we are imperfect human beings and so we doubt and we question.

We question when we hear passages of scripture telling us that women should be silent in church. We doubt when we hear passages of scripture that tell slaves to obey their masters. We wonder when scripture is used to condemn entire classes of people.

Imagine what the Church might look like if someone had not put voice to their doubts. What would the Church look like if someone had not voiced doubts about the previously understood role of women in the church? What would the Church look like if questions regarding the biblical assumptions about slavery had not been raised? What if Luther or Calvin had remained silent and not voiced their doubts about the church of their day? What if Galileo had not challenged the Church's belief that the world was flat? What if no one had asked "WHY?"

I was asked, not long ago, if we can divorce logic from belief. Of course, one can, but I think the better question is should we divorce logic from belief. For me, the answer is a resounding no. Given that our intellect is a gift from God, it follows that doubts and questions are to be expected and even welcomed and not, as many of our fundamentalist brothers and sisters believe, a sin. Perhaps it is doubting and the asking

of questions, and the inevitable search for answers that follows, that help us come to a better understanding of the life God is calling us to lead.

When we doubt, we ask questions. When we ask questions, we challenge the “it’s always been this way” attitude. Challenging these assumptions is how the church has not only survived but thrived. Challenging these assumptions is how this imperfect, human created institution we call church, has moved closer to what God has always intended it to be.

To my way of thinking, Thomas the Doubter should be renamed Thomas the Bold. He did not separate logic from belief and serves as a prime example of how to live with both faith and doubts.

Here’s the thing. Doubts are part of being human. Questions are how we, as individuals and as the church, grow and move closer to God’s plan for us.

So, I challenge you to ask the tough questions, express your doubts. Be Thomas the Doubter and Thomas the Bold. Be assured that when you doubt, the resurrected Christ will meet you right where you are, despite your doubts. Be assured that when you question, the risen Christ meets you right where you are, despite your questions and without criticism or condemnation and be assured that, in the end, the fearfully locked doors can never keep God’s grace out.

Thanks, Be to God.