

Gospel Reading: 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^[a]), 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 finger in the mark of the nails and 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^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah,^[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Faith in Our Doubts”

It was still Easter, but it was evening. The disciples were huddled behind locked doors in what was most likely the upper room, the same room where they’d had the last supper with Jesus three days earlier, the same one in which Jesus had washed their feet and given them the commandment to love one another as he’d loved them, the same room in which they’d been hiding since Jesus’ crucifixion. The mood in the room had changed a bit, because some of their number had visited Jesus’ tomb early that morning and were reporting back that the tomb was empty and that angels there said that Jesus had risen from the dead! *“Could it really be true? What would it mean if it was?”* There was some optimistic confusion, but mostly, there was still a great deal of fear. Their leader had been killed, and they could quite possibly be next. They were listening for a step on the staircase and braced for a knock at the door.

They couldn’t merely be told of Jesus’ resurrection. They’d seen him die. They required an encounter with the risen Lord to believe. And this, of course, happened. Jesus appeared in their midst and greeted them with, *“Peace be with you”*. Then he breathed on them. He breathed the enlivening breath of God on them...the RUAH, the source of life...that which was blown over the face of the deep when there was nothing but chaos, that which was breathed into the lungs of Adam and Eve, that which brought those dry bones to life in Ezekiel’s vision, that which blew through the room as a mighty wind at Pentecost. Jesus breathed his Holy Spirit on the disciples, and then he said to them, *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

It is a great post resurrection story, however, there was one disciple who missed out on it, Thomas. We don’t know where he was, but John tells us that when Thomas returned and the disciples excitedly told him of what had happened, he 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.”* In fact, the Greek says it more like *“I will never believe”*. He needed what they’d had, an encounter with the Spirit of the Living God. And sure enough, later, Jesus came again, when Thomas was present, and said, *“Peace be with you,”* He told Thomas to put his finger in

his wounds and to not doubt but believe. And then, Thomas offered one of the most beautiful confessions of faith in all of Scripture: *“My Lord and my God”!*

It’s important to note that Jesus did not belittle or smack Thomas down for his doubt. He instead offered to him what he needed to have to understand. And we should take a cue from Jesus that it’s not fair to label Thomas disdainfully as “Doubting Thomas”, as often we do, because having a religious faith does not mean that we have no doubt. In fact, doubt is actually a normal and natural part of faith, the opposite side of the same coin. Both “faith” and “doubt” even come from the same root word in Greek. Frederick Buchner says, *“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”*¹ The great theologian, Paul Tillich says that *“doubt isn’t the opposite of faith but an element of faith.”*² And Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor similarly says, *“Doubt often brings me to poke at what I believe. And when what I was believing topples, I realize then that it was an idol. Doubt has been a divine gift that has led me deeper into God.”*³ They’re correct. It is a great blessing that as Christians we have the freedom to admit when we have doubts. It is good to be able to believe without question, without doubt, but it is also not wrong to doubt. Our faith often needs the questions of doubt and the seeking of understanding to then grow and become stronger. In essence, we need have some “faith in our doubt”, faith that in asking the questions, we will find what we need, more clarity and certainty, or more likely, more life-giving, spirit-filled questions.

I appreciate Rev MaryAnn McKibben Dana’s insight on this as she points out that we should be grateful for Thomas because without his doubt, his probing questions, we’d not have some of the most treasured and important statements about Jesus nor our identity in Christ.⁴ She points to another time when Thomas sought understanding, to John 14, when Jesus says, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled, In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it*

¹ Frederick Buechner. *“Doubt”* <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/26/doubt>. (accessed 4-6-18)

² Paul Tillich quoted in Timothy G. Warren. *“Doubt Strengthens Faith, Easter 2(A)-2017.* <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/doubt-strengthens-faith-easter-2-2017> (accessed 4-15-20).

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. Quoted in interview by Bob Abernathy in Religion & Ethics News Weekly. Mar 9, 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/03/09/march-9-2007-barbara-brown-taylor/1792/> (accessed 4-6-18).

⁴ MaryAnn McKibben Dana. *“Doubt Your Fear, Have Faith in You Doubts”* https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtcZoGSE5Tef817sEGH_uiv (04/15/20).

were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” After saying this, Thomas said to him, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” and Jesus replied, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*” Yes, we can be grateful for Thomas’ questions. (*pause*)

Now, saying this, there are times when our questions come up empty, when our seeking answers to the where? why? How long? Is it true? result in silence. Maybe you’re asking these questions now during this covid pandemic. I know I certainly have been. (How long must this last, O Lord? Does this really need to be? Can you not just stop this? Where are you, Lord?)

Well, friends, I think that we have this passage today given to us to tell us that this is when, we need to look once again to the example of Thomas. We need to become “beholders”.⁵ We need look around and behold the evidence of God WITH us. We need look around and behold the evidence of God FOR us. “*Behold, it was very good*” “*Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy*”, “*Behold, this is my Son with whom I am well pleased*”, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,*” “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock,*” “*Behold, there was a sower who went out to sow,*” “*Behold, the veil in the temple was torn in two*”.

Just before he makes his profound statement of faith, Thomas beheld. In fact, he was asked to behold. He was asked by Jesus to look at, to touch, to feel his wounds. That was what Jesus knew would resolve any doubt or question Thomas had and what would move Thomas forward in faith. Thomas then beheld Jesus sharing his lot, coming into his darkness and shedding the light on it, such that it was known for what it was...DOOMED. Yes, the evil around us is doomed. It was defeated on the first Easter morning 2000 years ago, and even though we still live in a broken world, evil is doomed.

Mother Theresa, the great Roman Catholic nun who devoted her life to serving the poor and destitute around the world, especially in Calcutta, wrote in her journal, which has since been published, of her many years of doubt and searching for God’s love and finding only an

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor. “*Leaving Church*” (New York:Harper Collins;2006), 110.

emptiness in her soul. She wrote, *“Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear”*⁶ But yet she also wrote of seeing Jesus in and at work in the least of these, in the sick, the weak, the horribly poor and suffering. *“Each one of them is Jesus in disguise,”* she said.

When, brothers and sisters, our very normal and often necessary doubt and questions are coming up empty, we need look into the wounded and broken places around us because that’s where Jesus said he would be. That’s where he said we could behold him, touch him, stare at and study him, learn from him and feel his peace. It is where he’d breathe on us so that we’d receive his Spirit, be renewed, and sent to do his mission and purpose for our lives.

*While I missed it, Jill Duffield from the Presbyterian Outlook explains the moving report which aired on a recent documentary. “Reporters,” she says, “went into an intensive care unit in a NYC hospital. They interviewed nurses and doctors still wearing their protective clothing from head to toe. These care givers were obviously overwhelmed and stressed, but yet were stalwart and committed. One nurse said that despite the number of deaths, she always assumed and therefore acted as if the patient she was caring for would recover and live. She noted that without that hope and expectation she could not do her job in the way she needed to do it. The end of the video showed a circle of masked men and women huddled in prayer. That same nurse told the reporter that they prayed before each shift, Christian prayers, Muslim prayers, Jewish prayers, every kind of prayer, displaying faith and a belief in healing and hope and life, in the face of deadly, overwhelming desperate circumstances. Seeing and hearing their courage, their calm in the eye of the storm, their hope in the face of fear, bore witness to the resurrection, to the presence of our wounded and living Lord, whose Word is trustworthy and promises are true, to the presence of him with them in the heart of suffering.”*⁷

Yes, brothers and sisters, even in the darkest times, especially in the most broken and bleak of all places, that is where our questions and our seeking, our doubt, will lead us...they will

⁶ Mother Teresa. Quoted in MaryAnn McKibben Dana. *“Doubt Your Fear, Have Faith in Your Doubts”*
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtcZoGSE5Tef8l7sEGH_uiw (04/15/20).

⁷ Jill Duffield. *“2nd Sunday of Easter”* presoutlook@presoutlook.org (accessed 4-15-20)

lead us to behold the wounded and living Lord...who is present, sharing our lot, walking with us and knowing our pain. They will lead us to a place of great comfort and lack of fear and peace because evil is doomed and all his other promises are true. We can even now behold his glory and each say, with confident faith, *“My Lord and my God”*.

Amen and Amen.

Similarly, Henri Nouwen, famous writer and theologian, wrote, *“So I am praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting”* yet he spent so much of his life working with the poor in Peru and with the severely disabled in L’Arche in Trosly, France, stating that *“When God became as we are, God made it possible for us to share in God’s infinite compassion”*.^{8,9}

⁸ Timothy Warren

⁹ Henri Nouwen quoted in Vernon Grounds. *“Compassion. Learning to Love Like Jesus”* (Grand Rapids: Zondervon; 2016), 4.