

In Need of Assurance

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Reverend Leah Robberts-Mosser

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There was a scientific study done a few years ago. Picture this with me would you – toddlers were put at the top of a very tall staircase. Across from them on a balcony were their mothers. These toddlers were chosen because they had learned that stairs were a dangerous place to be. And so the toddlers stood at the top of the staircase fretting, worrying and wondering, filled with question? What should I do? The study was this: to see whether or not the facial expression of their mother changed the way that they dealt with the situation. What the toddlers did not know was that they were not in any danger because there was a large piece of glass, like a glass floor, which spread between them and their mothers. If they did take a step forward, they wouldn't fall down the steps, but instead, they would crawl across, as if in thin air, to the waiting arms of their mom.

Toddlers who looked across that great divide and saw panic and fear on the face of their mothers stayed exactly where they were. But the toddlers who looked across and saw a smile, inviting arms, and assurance, even though the first step could be very treacherous, they took it! They actually crawled across the glass all the way over to their mothers.

How often are our questions like this? We feel like that toddler on top of the most precarious peak with all of our questions and our doubts and our concerns. There is nothing we can do to convince ourselves to take a step. How often do we need the assurance of someone else to either say, “Come, its okay”, or the assurance of someone else to say, “Trust your gut, stay right where you are”. Either way so often, we need the assurance of someone else – just like Thomas did.

That is what we are exploring today. As we prepare for the word preached, would you join your hearts and minds with me in prayer.

Let us pray. Oh God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, oh God, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What a week it has been for the disciples! WHAT A WEEK! First we find in our story that later that day, later on the day of the resurrection Jesus does exactly what he said he would do – he shows up where the disciples are. “Peace be with you,” he says and they are amazed at what they see! Except for Thomas who couldn’t make it that day for some reason. Thomas is left out of that moment when they all get to see Jesus for the first time. The disciples aren’t afraid to share with him. As soon as they see him, they tell him how excited they are that he is alive. “He is alive!

Can you believe it?” they say. Then Thomas says, “No, I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it! I am going to have to see this with my own two eyes. I may even have to poke my fingers around in his wounds for me to believe it – I don’t believe what you say just because you said it! I have to see it with my own two eyes.”

Thomas, he is the post-modern disciple. He would fit in so well with us because there is so much about our existence which is similar to what Thomas does. We challenge so often. We ask so many questions and we have to see things with our own eyes to believe them. It is not enough anymore to sit and listen to someone else give us answers. No, we have to go and find our own answers for ourselves. We search the Internet; we do research; we ask questions. We are good at being Thomas. But here is my question. If we are so good at being Thomas, why does Thomas always get such a bad wrap from us? Look at the cover of our Bulletin – *Doubting Thomas*. Oooo! His head is down, he’s ashamed. Doubting Thomas – oh it’s bad, it’s bad, it’s bad!

It seems like we are okay with asking questions and challenging in every arena of life, but in this one. And even for us in progressive churches, still sometimes, when we have questions, when we have doubts, when we have struggles of faith, still sometimes it is seen as bad, as negative and wrong.

You have seen it happen before. You will be in a small group or maybe in a conversation and someone will say, “I don’t know if I believe that – I just don’t know if I believe that.” And then later, we hear the way that story gets told. “Well, they have some doubts.” “Well, they have some questions”. “Well they could be a pillar of faith, but they have some questions”. It’s as if our questions and our doubts lessen our faith.

I think, instead, our questions and our doubts strengthen our faith if we allow them to. What happens more times than not though, I fear, is that since we are afraid to question, or we are afraid of what other people might think of us when we question, then we tend to ignore those things. One of two things happens. One is that we become skeptics. When we don’t engage our questions, when we don’t wrestle with our questions then we just ignore them, we put them on a shelf. If we have to put those things on a shelf, then we might as well put other things on a shelf, too, because what can we really be certain about if we are not certain about those? Then everything becomes a question. Since we have these few little nagging things then we can’t put faith in anything. And we become skeptics.

Or, since we have these concerns and these doubts, but we don’t want to become skeptics, we blindly take in everything as possible. Well, that could be possible and this could be possible, too. In fact, all of it could

be possible so I don't really know what I believe, I just know that it is all possible. That doesn't do us much good either.

Instead, I think we ought to take a cue from today's story about how we are to deal with our questions and about how we as a faith community, should be with one and another in our questions. That's where the story begins. First you will notice that when the disciples have this interaction with Jesus they don't keep it to themselves. No, they go and they share it. They tell Thomas how excited they were that they saw Jesus. We have to be willing to share our experiences with each other. We have to be willing to say "I have seen the risen Christ and here is how it happened".

But then, if someone acts or reacts like Thomas does, we can't jump to conclusions or fly off the handle, but just live with them. If you notice, in the text, it takes a whole week before Jesus shows up and talks to Thomas. The disciples didn't banish Thomas, they didn't send him away, they didn't shun him, they continued to be the church with him.

When Jesus shows up, you will notice that Jesus does not say, "Your questions are bad". Instead Jesus says, "Here, if you need to, stick your finger in it, it is fine, go ahead; dig around a little more if you need to. Really get in there. Search it out. It may be messy, that's okay".

We have to provide that kind of room and space for each other – to get messy with our questions. It is there that Thomas finds the assurance that he needs.

I think today, particularly today, before we move on from this topic, we ought to think about this subject in a little different light. Does anybody else find it odd that today we are talking about Doubting Thomas on the same day that we are installing Thomas as our pastor? I find that odd! I find it odd and maybe actually serendipitous for us today. This afternoon is all about the celebration, this afternoon is all about the party. This afternoon a lot of guests will be here. Today it is just us, so we can be real with each other as a church family about what this text may have to say to us today in light of what today is all about

The first thing that I would say to you is not to be surprised when your Pastor Thomas has questions and doubts just like Thomas the Disciple. For that matter, don't be surprised when I have questions or doubts either. Don't be surprised when your pastors become just as human as you are.

We have questions and concerns and doubts about big spiritual questions, about life and death, God and faith, salvation and resurrection, and how all of that works. We have those questions too. But as pastors we also have questions about how it is that we all live

that out with each other. I think today, in particular as we prepare to install Tom as our senior pastor we ought to take a look at how that works.

There will be moments when we all have questions. There will be moments when we all want to take a few steps back and say, "I can't go any further because I need to see for my own eyes. I am not ready to take a leap of faith; I need to see for my own eyes". And I would invite you when those moments happen to be like Jesus and come with your wounds wide open, if need be. Say, "Here, let's dig through this together so that we can find the assurance that we all need, together, to live a life of the risen Christ together."

There will be doubts, there will be questions. There will be disagreements, there will be hard times, but there will be good things too. Sometimes the only way that we get to those is because we have assured each other that we can.

And so today, today as we leave this place and come back for the celebration that will happen at 3:00 p.m., think of those things, bring those things along with you and be ready to assure one and another that this is indeed a new day that God has made for us.
Amen.