

# DOUBT FAITH

**SUNDAY, MAY 1, 2011**

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## **Doubting Like Thomas**

### **John 20:19-29**

Thomas is one of my favorite disciples. I suppose I pay extra close attention to him because he is the source of my name, but I've always been partial to the story for this week. I love what it says about Jesus, and I appreciate how Thomas was brave enough to admit what he wanted from Jesus. And I think Thomas gets a bad rap in the way we remember him, just because he was the one who doubted. Sure, he doubted, but really, who doesn't? And I think he had his reasons, and shouldn't be punished by the two thousand year memory of Christianity just because he was honest enough to admit his shortcomings to his peers. And we do punish Thomas, for doubting. When we call someone a "doubting Thomas," this is not a compliment. We are telling that person that they are getting in the way; that they are being a naysayer, or a hater, refusing to go with the flow of what is obvious and necessary, and are obstinately clinging to their disbelief. Don't be a doubting Thomas. She's being such a doubting Thomas. We're not supposed to doubt, according to Christian tradition, so this is not a compliment.

We could have remembered him as "faithful Thomas" or "courageous Thomas," because he was both of those things. One of the only other references to Thomas in the Bible comes from the story of Lazarus, and in that story, Thomas was brave, courageous and faithful. Jesus was getting ready to return to Bethany, where he would face great danger, and the disciples all tried to talk him out of it. But Thomas alone was the one who said, "Let us go as well, and die with him." He wasn't about to abandon Jesus.

But we do not remember Thomas for his courage in the face of impending doom. We do not remember his great faith in rallying the disciples to follow Jesus even though that put them in harms' way. We don't say about one another admiringly, "wow, she's a real courageous Thomas" or

“thank you for being such a faithful Thomas.” No, we mar his memory by calling each other a “doubting Thomas” when we have insufficient faith. Because in the world of Christianity, it is difficult to deal with having doubt. As Christians, doubt is almost taboo for us. We act as if it's a bad thing. We act as if doubt poses a threat to our faith, as if it is a destabilizing or destructive agent. We act as if admitting that we have any doubt is a sign of weakness. We act as if the presence of doubt means that there must be a shallowness of faith, as if any doubt about God means that there is a deficit of faith. We don't want to build a church based on doubt.

As a church, we want to come together around our common beliefs. We want to be proactive about what we believe, and we want to articulate and proclaim these beliefs. It hardly seems satisfying to come together and raise a bunch of questions. We want answers to the hard questions of life, not confusion. In response to a world of chaos, we want containment, a way to make sense. We don't want to have to sit with difficult questions. We want solid faith, not shaky doubt. And so we tend to treat doubt like it is a bad thing. We tend to vilify doubt, and to minimize its presence in our lives. We tend to bury it down deep instead of talking about it openly, because we don't want to be judged for having doubt.

As Christians, it is difficult to deal with having doubt. But the reality is, contrary to our cultural, Christian aversion to doubt, contrary to our history of condemning those who doubt, or those whose ideas stray too far from the beaten path, doubt is an essential aspect of our faith. It is an essential aspect of our faith.

Parker Palmer reminds us, the greater our capacity for faith is, the greater our capacity for doubt will be. And Pastor Tom Ott has reminded us that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but rather certainty. To walk in certainty is not the same thing as walking in faith. You cannot have faith

without doubt. I think this bears repeating, because sometimes, I actually think we conflate doubting in good faith, with doubting based on certainty. There is an important difference. Sometimes, that which we call doubt is actually a form of certainty masquerading as doubt. Here's what I mean when I say "good faith doubt" vs. "doubt based on certainty."

One of the aspects of doubting in good faith is that it is rooted in not-knowing. Those who doubt in good faith are interested in what is true, and have not found it yet. We are unwilling to lay claim to something prematurely, or something which is not yet ours to believe for whatever reason. We doubt because we do not know, and we have not seen sufficient evidence to believe, but we are committed to the truth, whatever that may ultimately turn out to be. Religious doubt which results from genuine not-knowing is an example of doubting in good faith. There is a certain openness to doubting in good faith.

The opposite of doubt which is rooted in not-knowing is doubt which is rooted in certainty, or thinking that we know something. It is doubt which says, I don't know if thing A is true, but I am sure that thing B is false. This doubt is more concerned that thing B remain false than whether and how thing A might be true. I think we're seeing an example of doubting in bad faith with those who profess doubt that Barack Obama is a legitimate American citizen. I suspect their doubt is not based in genuine inquiry and truth-seeking, but rather some inner conviction based on something else that is telling them that this guy is simply too weird to be a genuine American. And so, all the evidence in the world is not convincing if it goes against this inner conviction, because this doubt is not about the truth at heart. This kind of doubt has an agenda beyond merely seeking the truth. This doubt is invested in a particular kind of outcome. It has an agenda.

The other major difference between good-faith doubt and doubt rooted in certainty is that with good-faith doubt, there is a capacity for growth and change. I may doubt this now, but I may yet be able to believe. With doubt rooted in certainty, however, there are conclusions I have already made; there are things that I am not willing to entertain. Certain channels are closed off, and so there is less capacity for growth.

Let us pause for a moment and sit on this question: does our own doubt have an agenda? For the things that I'm doubting, am I more attached to my sense of certainty than I am to discovering the truth? Am I more invested in growing and changing and coming to believe, or in being right about what I refuse to believe?

I don't know what Thomas' motivation was for his own doubt. I don't know what his motivation was when he said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." He had his reasons. But what matters is what he did thereafter. I believe this story offers a good road-map for navigating our own doubt, like Thomas does.

The first thing to note is that Thomas' doubt stems from his having missed out on an experience shared by the rest of the community. He was grieving. It was three days after Jesus was executed. He was so sad, or possibly angry or afraid, that he did not get together with all of the other disciples when they gathered and huddled together in a locked room that night. Thomas was not there, and consequently, he missed out on the collective insight of the gathered community.

Sometimes when we withdraw from those around us, in our doubt and uncertainty, we miss out on the collective insights of the gathered community. Shortly after Andria and I got married, I started having doubts about our future together. Just little ones at first, but they were rooted in

anxiety that we might not be able to sustain our marriage in the long run – what if something goes wrong? What if she changes over time? What if I change? I started worrying about little things, but I kept them bottled up, because I certainly didn't want Andria to think I wasn't on board with our marriage. I thought that if I admitted that I was having some doubts, that it could unravel everything. These doubts felt very threatening to me and our life together, so I put them away, deep down, and tried to forget about them.

And over time...that didn't work at all. Months passed, and I was dealing with this doubt all on my own – I wasn't talking about it with my very best friend in the world, or anyone else at all. And because I was holding it in secret, it started feeling much more threatening and dangerous than it actually was. Remember Lazarus? Don't go there...it'll stink! But when I finally stepped out on a limb and faced my fear and admitted what I was worried about to Andria, a strange thing happened: all that fear I had holding onto by myself largely dissipated. This nagging doubt that I had didn't end up wrecking my marriage; to the contrary, by being honest about it together, we proved that our relationship is strong enough to hold our questions and uncertainties – provided that we hold them together. When any of us withdraw and isolate ourselves in our doubt, trying to contain it deep within, it can feel much more threatening and dangerous than it actually might be. But when we bring our doubt to our friends and loved ones, to our trusted community of people, that can become the catalyst for transforming doubt into belief.

This is exactly what Thomas does. He takes his doubt back to the community, and lets them know exactly where he stands. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” There is something bold about that kind of honesty. It is risky to admit that your faith is not seemingly as strong as that of those around you. But Thomas owns his doubt to his people, and consequently, he

makes the shift from isolated and withdrawn to being back in the community. And the next time his disciples get together, he is there too. And this time, now that he is back within his community, even though he still has doubt, what happens? God shows up to the gathered community.

By facing our doubt together, in community, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit showing up in our midst. The groundwork, the foundation for growth in faith is to be in community with one another. This is especially important for Christians, as together, we comprise the Body of Christ, not in isolation. This is what we celebrate every time we take Communion: the coming-together of the members of the Body of Christ. When we do this, the Spirit of God moves in our midst in a deeper way than if we are by ourselves alone.

When Jesus showed up to Thomas, he gave Thomas exactly what he needed to believe. I am sure that Thomas did not expect that Jesus would show up again, but he did. We may not always get the answer we think we are looking for when we take our doubts back into the community, but when we do, we are staying connected. We can benefit from the Holy Spirit which manifests among the gathered community. In a moment, when we celebrate Communion together, let us be honest about the doubts that reside on our hearts, and seek the courage to bring them into the haven of our gathered people in a safe and meaningful way. Let us do as Thomas, lifting up our doubt before one another and before God, so that we might to provoke our transformation, from doubt in isolation to deeper belief in community.

Amen.

