

Doubt is a Good Thing!

Scripture Lessons: 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

I don't know why history has always given Thomas a hard time. We still think of him as "doubting Thomas." We like Peter a lot better. He gets the headlines as the leader of the troubled followers on Resurrection Sunday. He even gets the Lectionary lessons on Easter along with the women. We think we are more like Peter – brash and trying to be brave, ready to be completely human, but out there in front of everyone.

Which Peter are we like? Before cross in denial or after Pentecost in affirmation like the Epistle lesson? Peter is the one who takes up a sword when Jesus is around and then does not even admit he is a follower when he is out in public. Peter is the one who needs to be sure, whether or not he stops long enough to think about what he is doing. Peter is the one who generally is ready to offer his advice before he listens to someone who may know more than he does – like, say, his Lord and Messiah. Come to think of it, I am more like Peter sometimes than I would ever want to admit. How about you?

Maybe I should take a closer look at Thomas. He has his reservations, his caution, his questions, ...and yes, his doubts. But I have mine, too. He is never listed on the "inner circle" of the followers Jesus sees for leadership, but most of us don't aspire to leadership roles. It is obvious that he is loyal, because he is still around in spite of his hesitations. And here's the truth of the matter: they all have reservations until they saw the risen Lord walk through a closed door. Thomas was not there that night (and to give him the benefit of his doubt, we don't know why). I think we all can identify with Thomas: he isn't ready to believe reports that the Master who soldiers made sure died on a cross has come back from the dead. Maybe he is from Missouri and has to be shown. A lot of us want more evidence before we will commit. We call it being realistic, or conservative, or just careful and cautious. Admit it. Whether you feel like Peter or Thomas or both, you are in the same situation they were. Both of them doubted until they saw the Lord.

Now if we can put ourselves in Thomas' place more sympathetically, I think we might see that a lot of the reading of Jesus that second Sunday in the upper room has been a bit prejudiced against Thomas. When we read the lesson, we hear Jesus criticizing Thomas, chastising his doubts, almost forcing him to touch his side so Thomas will be forced to believe.

Instead, let's remember that Thomas' friends missed him that night, and told him what happened. They weren't judging Thomas. Why would we think Jesus was? Wasn't Jesus kind and sympathetic to human honesty? Given the way Jesus dealt with most everyone – including Peter in fact – we can hear the softer tone in his words to the man he knew pretty well after three years of constant contact. "Thomas, you aren't alone here in this room. Lots of people are slow of heart to believe. Look at my hands. Go ahead and touch them if you need to. You can trust me. I'm here."

Doubt is a good thing! We have given doubt a hard time for too long. We hear the word “doubt” and think of Thomas. What is the opposite of “faith”? Doubt, of course. Doubters lack the faith. They doubt so they don’t get the miracles, or even get their prayers answered. All they need is “a grain of mustard seed” worth the faith, but they doubt even when they ask God for help. That’s why God doesn’t help them.

You think I’m over-stating the argument? Should I ask for a show of hands from those who have wondered why the Savior seemed far away when you needed him? Would you call that doubt? Of course. But I call it faith, too; ...or maybe we could call it just being honest and human. And right at the middle of being human and not knowing for sure is a basket full of very real human thoughts and feelings: doubt *and* hope, faith *and* fear, belief *and* question.

Not doubting means we have closed the door on learning something, on growing in perspective, on seeing a different answer because we asked the question instead of pretending we knew the answer. Doubt is a good thing when you open yourself to the possibility of new insight, wider vision, deeper faith, more trust. Doubt that asks questions opens up the imagination, leads to discovery. Where would we be if no one ever doubted how things are and asked if they could be different? ...with our backs to the wall in a cave trying to keep the fire between us and the beast? We were made to ask questions when God made us human and said we were good. Doubt is one of our very human, very good things.

Running away from doubt because we think it is a bad thing is really just denial. We run because we think that having faith means we have to be sure. Believing means being sure, being certain, *not* doubting. Being afraid to doubt means we are paralyzed by fear, frozen from action. Fear is the freezer, not the doubt. It is hard to move toward trust when you are paralyzed by fear. It is hard to work through something you are running away from. Facing doubt is not easy when you are afraid, but admitting you don’t know what the future is, ...well, a pretty human admission. And we are all better off when we admit we are human.

Everybody has fears and doubts. Remembering we followers are in a room full of followers trying to trust can make it easier to listen than to criticize, to confess instead of deny. Peter denied because he was afraid, but look what happened to him when he confessed he had doubted. Thomas takes his doubts into the room, and Jesus is waiting for him with open hands.

Let’s take a couple of quick examples of fear and doubt when facing questions that don’t have answers. How about having a pain and needing to go to the doctor because you know something is wrong. When I was about 12, I remember my favorite Uncle Levin coming by my dad’s shop. He had what he called a “cold” that had settled in his left arm and hurt when he coughed. My Dad told him to go to the doctor, and Lev said, “The only thing doctors are good for is signing death certificates.” It was an excuse. He didn’t doubt the doctor; he feared the unknown. Denial can be deadly, and sometimes facing fear when we are frozen or asking for help when we want to run can lead to a much better option.

Do churches have trouble with doubt and fear? We smile about those seven last words of the church: “We’ve never done it that way before.” It’s not a joke; it is an excuse and a confession that we would rather act sure and wrong than ask how we can imagine

and grow and discover how God is working in new ways among us. We don't doubt a Savior. We fear the unknown. Churches that get careful and paralyzed and go into "survival mode" – don't! Why would we doubt the risen Lord? The Christian faith is built on a promise that God raises us to new life when we die to our old and same ways. That is how it works with Christ and his body. Not to trust and risk is to live in denial, and puts us with the Peter who was afraid to confess we are followers in public. But he and Thomas had enough faith in their doubts to trust. Christ's love was stronger than their doubt, and Christ's hand are always open to us.

Trust in Christ's body means sharing doubts and overcoming fears with each other, and helping each other be honest because we are followers of a risen Master. Look what facing fears and doubts can do. Asking about the future and trusting with just a grain of mustard seed can get you a new pastor with surprising skills and exciting possibilities. The risen Lord is in you with power to do more than you ask or even imagine. And if you aren't excited to follow Christ into this church's future after what has happened around here in 25 years or the last two, then you've shut your eyes and closed your hands. God's future is the next step in front of you. In your doubts and fears and trust and following, you are more than conquerors though the One who loves you, ...and the One who has conquered sin and death for your sake can lead you to overcome your fear and doubt.

Come to think of it, let's admit that Jesus was "truly human" in his knowing and not knowing, because he was like us in every human way. He was also divine in his completely loving and trusting, to show us how much God loves and trusts us. Before all those upper room appearances of the risen Lord, there was the full-of-trust Messiah in a very hard week of trouble everywhere. Jesus trusted enough to pray and doubted enough to wonder what was really going to happen the next few days. If trust is the way it worked for Jesus, then trust is the way it works! Peter and Thomas and most all of them – and all of us – live by trusting Christ.

A lot of people give the guy who started the "Reformed Tradition" a hard time. They think Calvin said everything was predestined before it happened, and God was "in control" so the future was determined. I don't read Calvin that way, and I think most people who do are afraid of having questions and facing fears and doubts. We can take comfort that when Calvin wrote a hymn for worship, the words were some that Thomas could have sung by heart:

I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art;
My only trust, and Savior of my heart. ...
Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness;
No harshness hast thou and no bitterness. ...
Our hope is in no other save in thee,
Our faith is built upon thy promise free;
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
That in thy strength we evermore endure.

We might all do well to sing that hymn until we know it by heart. ...And we could try to be more like Thomas.