

Putting Faith in Doubt
John 20:19-31
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19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, *“Peace be with you!”*

20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, *“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”*

22 And with that he breathed on them and said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.*

23 *If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

25 *So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”*

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, *“Peace be with you!”*

27 Then he said to Thomas, *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

28 *Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”*

29 *Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

It is really difficult to give a sermon on belief and unbelief after this week. It’s actually been really difficult to do anything this week. Deb Detweiler was my academic advisor, my professor, my voice teacher, my choir director, and my friend, not to mention a fellow member of my congregation. My life was better with having her in it, and now there’s a hole where her life and love took up space in my heart. I imagine I’m not alone in this feeling.

This sermon is about how our scripture passage for this morning calls us to wrestle with belief and unbelief. How it calls us to be honest with ourselves, and how maybe in Thomas we can see a little bit of ourselves and therefore give ourselves permission to question this thing called belief. And how maybe others see themselves in the role of the disciples.

Many of us were taught that doubts are not “ok” when it comes to matters of faith. When it comes to faithshaming, which yes, is a thing, doubt has historically been seen as the antithesis to faith. We shame those who struggle. If you don’t believe what we believe and the way we live it out or

practice it, you are not a “true” Christian. Or, you might be told you simply don’t have enough faith.

The patron saint of those who have been shamed for their faith is found in our Gospel text this morning, and he’s often known as “Doubting Thomas.” Or as the Gospels call him, “Thomas,” or “The Twin. Jesus appears to the other disciples and they believe he is indeed risen. But Thomas turns out to be a bit of a contrarian. He says that unless he physically touches the holes where the nails and spear went in, he will not believe.

And there we get the name “Doubting Thomas.” We who know this story well immediately cast Thomas in a negative light. We read the resurrection story, we read the Gospel selections where Jesus predicts his eventual resurrection, we read where Jesus appeared to the disciples, why can’t this guy get his stuff together and believe?

Instead of calling this guy “Doubting Thomas, might I suggest a more appropriate moniker like “genuine Thomas?” Because a more passive aggressive Thomas, a more people-pleasing Thomas, a more insincere Thomas might have said, “I also believe,” or “Sure” while still not confident in this resurrection.

Thomas knows what he saw with his own eyes. He knows that he saw Jesus die. He knows that when people die, they don’t just come up from the grave 3 days later. This is not something that he’s ever experienced before. It’s over, it’s all over. This communion with Jesus, this talk of the kingdom, it’s all over. The state murdered Jesus and now we have to pick up and move on with the rest of our lives.

However, like everything else in the Bible, there’s something more going on there.

Thomas is persistent. He says “no” to believing one week, but then he shows up the next. He thinks the other disciples are making up stories, yet he continues to be there. Thomas is a model to us of persistence in times of crisis. Don’t underestimate the power of showing up. We can find ourselves judging when someone isn’t as enthusiastic as we are, when someone seems to be “present” but not “present” in ways we expect. Sometimes we judge ourselves when we come to church, or show up to a rally for a cause we believe in, or go to work when our hearts aren’t into

it...when in reality, Thomas shows us what it really means to show up. His showing up in a time of doubt is rewarded with faith.

I want to remind us that this reward isn't certainty, but faith. The ability to believe.

In taking a look at the Early Church, its focus was not so much on creeds and belief systems, but ways of living. For instance, if you were a part of the military, you had to leave that behind to join the church. In order to be baptized, you had to change the way you lived. The focus was on faith and desire to change and be transformed, not so much the orthodoxy you adhere to.

When Constantine came and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, there was a shift. Instead of focusing on living out the Gospel, or the "Good News," the focus turned to what you believed. There were "orthodox theologians" and there were "heretics." The church adapted the hierarchical structure of the Roman Empire. Also, women, who were a large part of Jesus' ministry, were shoved into the shadows and women church leaders were seen as "heretical."

The radical reformation, from which we Anabaptists get our humble beginnings, turned all of this hierarchical structure on its head. We worked to make believer's baptism central to our faith. To make how we lived out the words and teachings of Jesus central to our message as Christians. However, with the passage of time, we've morphed into a hybrid of the hierarchical structures of Constantinian Christianity with a distinctly low-church feel. As you can see, I'm not wearing any collars or robes up here. But if we look at our own beginnings as a church, both capital "C" and lower case "c," certainty was not required, rather, a desire to be baptized and transformed permeated every level of church life.

Back to our story of Thomas, let's not forget our first encounter with him in the Gospel of John. After Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, he encourages his fellow disciples to accompany Jesus to Bethany saying, "Let us go that we may die with him!" That's not the statement of a doubter. That's the statement of someone who fully believes, but after the trauma of the crucifixion, he has some reservations. While today we may not know that trauma firsthand as the disciples did, we see evidence every day of the life and words of Jesus be twisted and turned and used to incite violence,

or exclude our neighbors. This hurts us, and we start to wonder if we really ever were walking with Jesus to begin with.

Thomas wanted tactile evidence of the resurrected Jesus. He doesn't just want to see Jesus, he wants to put his hands in the holes in his body. He wants proof that Jesus really died, and has now actually been resurrected. He wants to see that Jesus' open wounds are real. He wants proof that the last while has not been some horrible dream. He wants to see the face of God. And when he does put his hands in the open wounds of Jesus' body, he testifies "My Lord and my God!" Thomas' faith becomes his own. This is almost a rebaptism of sorts for Thomas, a public declaration of faith. Maybe this moment is a bit Anabaptist in nature.

When I was working with college students at EMU, doubt was the very nature of young adult faith. I heard all kinds of excuses made about why students' faith was not "ideal" by their standards. I heard things like, "I just don't know where I'm at," or "Church just isn't my thing right now," or "I don't know how I feel about organized religion," or "I do my own thing, I'm spiritual but not religious." This was usually followed up by lots of caveats and explanations as to what got them there in the first place.

I'd listen, but then I'd tell them what was bubbling up in my heart through all the explanations, and apologies, and narratives, something I wish someone had told me decades ago. Your faith does not need to look like what anyone says it should. It doesn't need to look like what I say it should, it doesn't need to look like what the Mennonite Church says it should, it doesn't need to look like what your parents say it should, it doesn't need to look like what your significant other says it should. You can have spiritual role models, you can desire to grow in your faith, but your faith is your own. Your faith is fine. You will never be punished for what your faith looks like.

I think one of the biggest misunderstandings about faith, and also one of the biggest things that keeps us from church and all things spiritual is this false notion that we are not worthy. We've been told our doubt is not welcome. Our faith is not worthy. We don't measure up. We see others not measuring up and we get disillusioned. So we stop coming. We stop participating. And we stop believing. We feel like we disappoint our parents, our relatives, and ourselves and get stuck in some sort of shame cycle that we blame the church for. And that's not a bad place to lay blame. The church has taught people that there is no room for doubt, no room for

questions, and no room for second guessing. Fortunately, I feel that at least in some circles, the church is rehabilitating itself from that image. The church is slowly turning into a place where questions are welcome, doubts are welcome, and certainty is honored but certainly not required before darkening the doorway of a house of worship. Regardless, we are still trying to undo the damage of years of shaming people into a faith that looks a certain way.

And while I would love everyone to be at church every Sunday morning fully engaged with hearts and minds, worshipping and growing in their love for God that just isn't the reality for everyone. People live real lives, and in those real lives, there are struggles. There are times when we can't be fully "present." There are people who come to church doubting why they're coming in the first place. Or maybe they feel certain about some things, but uncertain about a whole lot.

But I think there is true holiness in doubt. There needs to be some belief in the first place to begin to doubt, just as there was in Thomas. There is holiness in showing up. There is holiness in trying to figure things out. There is holiness in our struggle to better understand God and ourselves.

"You are empowered to doubt, to ask questions, to wrestle with angles in search of the message Jesus wants you to live out." This story of Thomas reminds me of Jacob wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32. Jacob wrestles with who he knows to be God. Literally wrestles. There is no bowing down, no eloquent phrase said, no hymns, no liturgies. Jacob grabs the angel and wrestles with them for hours because he wants a blessing. He will not physically let go until he gets proof, confirmation, some sign that he has been with God. He is blessed, and forever changed.

And so it is with doubt. I don't believe doubt is always passive. Doubt can be a way of actively engaging in faith, and it can be an act of faith formation. Wrestling with the difficulties of the Christian life, wondering what this all means, needing to have an encounter with God in order to have belief in God is not something to be ashamed of. This kind of critical engagement with matters of belief and unbelief should be celebrated!

I also don't want to gloss over the fact that Jesus says "blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed." Deb Detweiler was one such blessed person. Deb, while still human, still fully believed. I have never met a

woman so intent on being healed in my life, and I have never met a woman with such a strong belief that healing was going to happen. At an anointing service last Fall, we sang, prayed, and laid on hands petitioning to God that she be healed.

And I doubted.

I doubted because of my own personal experience, and the trauma that I've lived through. I have prayed. I asked God for a miracle. I'm sure you have done so in your life, too. And maybe you got what you asked for. But that has not always been my experience. I wrestle with God, get angry with God, but ultimately yield to not knowing. I acknowledge that God's ways are not my ways and that I simply do not have all the answers.

This made my conversations with Deb all the more holy. Where I was full of unbelief, she was full of belief. Where I came with a glass half empty, negative outcome attitude, she answered life with more life. She answered love with more love. She answered the questions of faith with more faith. She was not swayed in her belief and desire to be healed.

I want to emphasize here that while it is holy and honest to doubt, it is also holy and honest to have faith and to believe.

And I want us to remember that there's a difference between curing and healing. Was Deb cured? No, she wasn't. She did not experience a cure in her lifetime. But was she healed? Well, that depends on your definition of healing. Is healing having good, honest, heartfelt relationships? Is healing sharing your gift with the world? Is healing caring for those around you? Is healing having a church family help out, connect with you, and lift you up in prayer? Is healing being the hands and feet of Christ to others? Is healing living your passion? If healing is those things, and yes, I believe there is healing in those things, then yes, Deb was healed. Deb was healed with each note that was sung, with each prayer that was lifted up in her name, with every stitch she got to make on a quilt, with each moment she got to spend with her grandson, with every moment we got to share space and time with her. Deb was able to experience healing. And so we all are now, knowing that she is at peace and with her creator who allowed us to be in relationship with her.

So we come to church today in various states. We are sinners, saints, doubters, believers, wrestlers with the Holy and messengers of Divine

Love. We also come grieving and unsure. What I love about the community of believers is that we have permission to be all these things, and feel all these things. In belief and unbelief Christ still shows up, the crucified Christ comes to us as the risen Christ, blessing us, honoring us not because we're perfect believers, not because we've achieved a certain level of faith, and certainly not because we have everything figured out. Christ comes because we are God's holy people. We have chosen to be God's holy, messy, imperfect, and often wayward people.

The risen Christ is present with us in remembering the gift of Deb's life, and her example of living life robustly and fully and full of life-affirming faith.

So I invite you to be blessed this week. Be blessed with doubt. Be blessed with questions. Be blessed with uncertainty. Be blessed knowing that your faith is holy and good and necessary. And be blessed knowing that the Crucified Christ is now the Risen Christ, come to set us free from that which weighs us down, offering us victory over death. Amen.