

Doubting Thomas
John 20: 19-31

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We live in the Age of Anxiety. Our world is anxious and afraid. Many older people are afraid their health will go bad and their savings will run out.

A number of younger people are afraid they won't have any savings for old age. Some fear the future, others dread the past.

Many college students are afraid that they won't have a job when they get out of college, and some parents may be afraid that these college kids will never be able to "get out" on their own.

Middle-agers often wonder if their lives have amounted to anything and young people sometimes wonder if there is anything to strive for.

We have all been through a year of Covid terror where we don't know if we are safe, or if we are spreading it to our loved ones. We've watched hundreds of thousands of people die. We've all lived in an age of terrorism, random violence and heaven knows what the weather is going to bring us this summer.

The disciples faced some pretty heavy fears and anxieties themselves on that first Easter evening as well. Their lives, it seemed, were in ruins. For three years they had devoted their lives to Jesus. They had left home, jobs and security to follow Him.

They had watched as Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead and proclaimed the love of God. And now, He had been crucified!!! The worst of their fears had come true!!! They were all alone in this scary world. What would they do? How could they cope? Was life worth the living?

They found themselves caught in a whirlpool of fear and anxiety!!! Even Peter, the boldest of them all, even Peter's brave vows of loyalty were followed with fear-filled words of denial.

The mocking, the beating, the horror of Jesus' death had left Jesus' disciples understandably shell-shocked!!! When they had been following Him, they were never able to understand what He was talking about when He told them that the Son of Man must suffer and die and then be raised on the third day.

They thought Jesus would never go away, never leave them. As our Gospel Lesson says, "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews..."

"For fear of the Jews?"

The disciples were living in dread fear that the next knock on the door would be the signal that they would be the next ones to face a cross. Everything was crashing in! Imagine the fear.

Then suddenly, on that first Easter evening everything changed!!! Suddenly Jesus was among them. They were all huddled in a locked room, all of them except Thomas. But where was Thomas? I suspect there may have been a reason he wasn't there when Jesus showed up the 1st time. I don't think he'd been out running an errand, or visiting a sick relative.

I think he was avoiding his friends. He was angry and bitter and wanted to be away from them to sulk. Thomas isn't being belligerent toward God and he's not trying to be unreasonable. He's just so bewildered and dejected he's not willing to accept anything less.

Thomas was probably a pretty angry man. He'd followed Christ for 3 years of his life. He adored Jesus so much that he was willing to go to Jerusalem and die with Him. But then...Jesus was betrayed by Judas. He was ridiculed and rejected by the crowds. He was beaten and whipped by the Roman soldiers.

And finally, Jesus was put to death in one of the cruelest ways known to man. And neither he nor his friends could do a thing to stop it. They hadn't even tried! Peter who had declared he would die for Jesus did nothing more than deny him three times. And where was everyone else to stand up for Jesus? His closest friends, the disciples for three years all went into hiding. All except John and John was with him to the end, accepting the position of the son to Mary, Jesus' mother.

Because Thomas was a practical person, and he lived in a practical world. He was shattered on Good Friday when Jesus died. But he wasn't about to succumb to fantasy. Dead was dead, and that was it. No one in their right minds would doubt it when the Romans said a

prisoner was dead. They were experts at killing! It's not that Thomas didn't want to believe that Jesus was still alive. But Thomas knew how the world worked. Dead was dead.

As the time for crucifixion came closer, the apostles were becoming concerned that Jesus was facing increasing hostility from the religious leadership and there may be an attempt to kill Jesus. As Jesus was traveling to Mary and Martha's to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, there were rumblings that Jesus' life was in danger. It was Thomas who said to the other disciples: "Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!" Up to this time, Thomas was taking a leadership role and there is no way he could be referred to as doubting. These words alone do not sound like the words of a skeptic but that's how we think of Thomas.

As the time grew closer when Jesus was arrested, all of the apostles ran and deserted Him. You remember the story of Peter denying him three times that night of the arrest. Thomas was no exception either. He along with the other disciples were afraid and they ran, probably to keep from being arrested as Jesus was. Can you imagine the kinds of emotions that Thomas was experiencing? He was afraid, confused and ashamed. Thomas had followed Jesus for years and years and when it really got tough for Jesus, it all came crashing down around Thomas and he ran like a rabbit.

After the death of Jesus, Thomas does not go back to be with the other apostles right away. We don't know where Thomas was, what he was doing or why he stayed away. For whatever reason Thomas does not go back with the others. The result is that Thomas loses out on the fellowship of the apostles and is not with them on Easter night when Jesus first appears to them.

When Thomas does return to the apostles, he hears that Jesus was raised from the dead and that Jesus appeared to them. The greatest event in all of history and he missed it. Jesus was alive. Thomas has no idea if Jesus will appear and because he ran, he knows very little details about the crucifixion, resurrection or the following appearance of Jesus following his death. All he knows is that he missed it. No doubt that Jesus knew that he was missing from the apostle group.

So, Thomas begins to deny the testimony of the apostles. Can you imagine the apostles telling this story to Thomas? He's probably standing there saying, "You have got to be kidding. That is impossible. It couldn't have happened that way." It was much easier to deny what had happened than facing the truth about himself. This leads him to demand the proof that Jesus really is alive. He verbalizes to everyone that he will not believe until he has touched the hands of Jesus and feels the hole in his side.

Poor doubting Thomas. To be honest, I feel sorry for the guy. Our tradition has singled him out as having an inferior faith because he actually expressed his doubt in the resurrection. All he did was make his reservations known out-loud.

But in any case, we still are left with a man who appears to have a crack in his wall of faith. What he is asked to accept is fantastic. And keep in mind he is hearing about the resurrection second hand. The other disciples had the advantage of seeing Jesus in person a few days prior. So, for Thomas, not having had the encounter with the risen Lord, this tale being spun by the delirious disciples is a bit unbelievable.

Even for us who have the benefit of knowing the end of the story, this seems unreal. I mean it is not every day that we hear about folks rising from the dead. Every once in a while, we hear the story of someone who crosses over and for some reason Jesus sends them back as their work on earth is not done.

So, put yourself in Thomas's place, having heard the news that the disciples saw Jesus alive. Just like Thomas, pretend that you have never heard the story of Jesus' resurrection. Did they see someone that just looked like Jesus? The idea that someone would be walking around after having died a few days previously is so far beyond the realm of possibility that I wouldn't even entertain the thought of it. And my guess is that not many of you would either. And yet, we somehow expect Thomas to accept this news in a matter-of-fact way; like this was no surprise at all.

On Easter night, the disciples were together in a house, hiding behind locked doors. A number of them had seen Jesus alive, and now they were scared. What were the Jewish

leaders going to do? Would they be arrested now? Would they be accused of stealing the body? Would anyone believe them if they told people that Jesus had risen from the dead?

Imagine one of the Romans walking up to the group of apostles and asking, "Where is your leader? He was buried, but now he's missing. Who took him?" And they respond by saying, "Jesus is alive. He rose from the dead". Everyone one knew that he was beaten within an inch of his life before he was even nailed to the cross. There was barely any life left when they crucified him. And the apostles are telling people that he came back to life. He rose from the dead. Did they really see Jesus? Was he really alive? They saw him or thought they saw him, but in their minds, they had to feel that it was too good to be true.

And then suddenly, Jesus was standing in the middle of them, but they were behind locked doors, so how did he get in? They locked the door behind themselves. How did he appear in their midst?

He said to them, "Peace be with you." He tells them that they can feel peace in their hearts. He was there, and they had nothing to worry about. He showed them his hands and side to prove to them that he wasn't a ghost, but that he was the same Jesus they had known, the same Jesus they had seen crucified just three days earlier.

Don't you think that before he showed them his hands and side, that at least some of the disciples wanted to ask him to see his hands. Don't you think that they may have been a bit doubtful that it was really Jesus?

Thomas was not there at that time. If he was there, he may have been the first one to ask to see the hands of Jesus. So why should he be labeled a cynic, or a skeptic, or a liberal. Since when was it bad for Thomas to question if it was Jesus. Since when is it wrong to admit that we don't understand

Thomas is just one in a long line of faithful people who have raised their voices to ask the hard yet faithful questions.

Faith lies in asking questions. Faith is when we are willing to embrace the doubts, ask the questions, and face the answers. Faith is believing in something that is beyond our ability to comprehend.

I'm not sure this is a story of doubting as much as it is a testimony to the difficulty of faith. So many times, as I have read stories out of the Bible, I question my faith, because some of those stories are so hard to believe.

Faith takes work. It begs us to ask tough questions. We don't have a set of rules where everything fits and everything makes sense. There are so many questions that are in our minds, even if we are not brave enough to verbalize the question. After all Thomas verbalized his need to see the holes in Jesus' hands and the hole in his side, and he gets labeled as someone who doubts that Jesus is alive and has risen from the dead.

I suppose what I am trying to say is that we have all been doubting Thomas's at some point in our lives. God came to us in the person of Jesus -- took on flesh so that we could see him, touch him, hear him, and be touched by him. And he died for all of us -- died on a cross, raised up for all to see.

Our lesson this morning is just as Thomas felt a need to touch Jesus, we should allow people to touch us and feel our faith.

There is no doubt that in the past few weeks, we have seen many terrible tragedies. The shootings in Atlanta of 8 Asian people, 10 people killed in Boulder, Colorado last week. And just a couple of days ago a Dr and his wife and two grandchildren were gunned down. How do people become so guilty or mentally ill that they feel a need to kill?

There is so much love that goes out to families who are touched by these murders. Money, gifts, thoughts and prayers are sent on their way when these tragedies happen. The way we respond declares that the Lord is alive and well and out there proving love and support to all families in need.

We are called to show our faith for the sake of others. May they see Jesus Christ alive in our hearts and lives. The ways we love each other; the ways we respond to those in need; the ways we respond to all God has entrusted to us will be visible evidence of Jesus' presence in our lives. Others will come to faith, not by what we say, but by the way we live. Be the example

that Christ wants us to be today. Open your heart to others and you will experience a love that you never thought possible. In the name of the Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Amen.