

When I was a small child- about five years old, I remember visiting my great-grandmother's house. My great uncle Leroy told me he could do a magic trick and make his teeth fall out with one push, and I told him I didn't believe him unless he could show me. As the words were coming out of my mouth, Uncle Leroy pushed his teeth out with one mighty thrust of his tongue, and he caught them in his hands, leaving his sunken, bare mouth separated from his set of teeth. I had no idea what dentures were at the time. I truly believed his real teeth had fallen out. I was scared out of my mind! I mean I was so spooked that I ran to the ONE bathroom in that old farm house, and I locked the door behind me. It took my mom a while to convince me that it was safe enough to unlock the door and come out. With tears in my eyes I told my mom that Uncle Leroy needed to see a dentist. I had never seen anything like that before, and I was afraid. My family still laughs at this story, and Leroy's legacy lives on as the jokester in the family.

I can't pinpoint exactly when I began my journey to becoming a skeptic, but I do credit my uncle and being a preacher's kid for helping me along. At some point things began to become more suspect, as I was and still am an inquisitive person. You shouldn't have to leave your brain or experiences at the door when you become a follower of Jesus. To be clear, I don't read in scripture where Jesus asks us to do that. No wonder Thomas has become one of the more real people of faith in the Bible for me. One of my first Sundays here at Triune someone came up to me after worship and said, "You know, Pastor, not everyone here is a believer." To which I said, "Yes, and they're welcome here." I'm most grateful to the Gospel of John and to the lectionary committee for having Doubting Thomas be the Gospel story every second Sunday in the Easter season. I love that a short seven days after we shout, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed" John "invites us

to face our doubts, speak our fears, and yearn for more- more intimacy, more encounter, more experience of the living, breathing Christ (Debie Thomas, www.journeywithjesus.net). John's Gospel is the only one who lingers on what it's like to be a disciple after Easter. He's the only one with this famous "Week Later story." Though we're told in scripture that Thomas, was also known as "Twin," most of us know him as "Doubting Thomas," but that isn't in the Bible. Thomas was the disciple who wasn't gathered that evening when Jesus first appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. Talk about FOMO (Fear of missing out). He is the disciple who represents all of us who are the last to know or the last to get it. The other disciples had seen the risen Christ. But Thomas had not and told them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Why does Thomas get the name and the blame of being the "Doubter" – when he states this one time? I would've said exactly the same. It's not like the other disciples were completely convinced of Jesus' resurrection either. According to John, when Mary Magdalene, the first witness at the tomb on Easter morning, ran to tell the other disciples that Jesus wasn't there, several of them raced off to see for themselves. Then they joined the others back in the locked upper room later that evening because they were afraid- much like when I locked myself in the bathroom. Especially in this past year, we're all intimately familiar with words such as "lockdown" and "fear." But Jesus found a way into the locked room- not once but twice. No, not locked doors, not death nor anything else in all creation will keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). Here Jesus showed them his hands and side and THEN...THEN... they rejoiced when they SAW the Lord. Only after seeing Jesus' hands and side did they rejoice. Isn't

it interesting how Thomas gets the bad rap as the doubter and has had this reputation as a skeptic in the church for almost 2,000 years...all because of one statement? He's almost like a one hit wonder...known for one thing and one thing only...doubting. Thomas was not asking for special treatment. His friends testified that Jesus was alive because they had seen those very wounds a week earlier! They testified to Thomas on the basis of their personal encounters with the risen Jesus. Thomas merely asked for the same. Yet over the centuries, many believers have been taught not to be like Thomas. But thanks be to God that someone says what Thomas says in John's Gospel.

If I had a dime for every time I asked God, "Give me a sign so that I'll know that you are who you say you are...that you are Sovereign...that you are in control...that you really are a loving God," I'd be rich. Or how many of us go our entire lives without ever yearning as boldly as Thomas did? Everywhere you look in John's Gospel...there are people needing signs that Jesus is the Messiah. Perform more miracles, Jesus. Do it again, Jesus. And even then...still...they don't always believe. Thomas isn't the first one in John, let alone in the Bible who needs proof before he can believe in the living and risen Christ. When I was growing up, I received mixed messages about doubting. I was told at an early age that doubt was the antithesis of faith. Then I was told that fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. Looking back I was often confused about whether or not to feel guilty and ashamed about doubting. But what strikes me here is that Thomas doubted publicly- without shame or guilt from himself or his faith community. Jesus doesn't berate or shame Thomas, either. Jesus doesn't lecture Thomas. Jesus doesn't patronize Thomas. Jesus doesn't kick Thomas off the disciple team. Jesus meets Thomas where he is and gives him what he needs. Jesus comes back

a week later, saying the same greeting to the disciples, "Peace be with you," and he then invites Thomas to place his finger in his side. We aren't told whether or not Thomas takes Jesus up on his offer. Regardless, Thomas confesses his faith saying to Jesus, "My Lord and My God!" With these words of faith, Thomas is one of the only disciples, if not the only one, to call Jesus God.

In Thomas I don't find weakness, rather I find a disciple who desired a living encounter with the risen Jesus. "A man who wouldn't settle for someone else's experience of resurrection, but stuck around in the hope of having his own. A man who dared to confess uncertainty in the midst of those who were certain (or seemed to be). A man who recognized the resurrected Lord in scars, not wonders" (Thomas). What if doubt is needed in our faith in order for us to grow closer to Jesus Christ? I know for me that this has been true thus far in my faith journey. In college, I came across these words by pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, and they resonated so deeply and met me just where I was. "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (*Wishful Thinking*).

Doubt may not lead us closer to having all the answers, but it almost always leads to growth in our faith. I wouldn't be here today preaching if I didn't doubt. Why then has the Christian community continued to hold such a negative attitude toward doubt? Maybe it's because we live in a world that doesn't look highly upon not knowing? We all want answers. "Alexa, can you tell me? Siri, what is the..?" "Hey Google..." We have the answers, so we think, right at our finger tips. We especially experience this "know it all" message sometimes in our religious

environment. If you don't know the answers about God...then you must not know God...you must not be doing the right things, etc. If you are questioning God then you must not be trusting God enough. We, as the church, often dismiss doubts and questions as indicators of an immature or weak faith- just like is sometimes assumed about Thomas. Or even worse...we continue to use the religious platitudes or clichés that we've often found unsatisfying in our own struggles of faith. But...in doing this...don't we forget that we are human and that we all struggle, especially in our faith? A colleague of mine was sharing with me a story of two couples who each had a child to die in the last year. Both of the couples- when asked who in the Bible gives them comfort?- they answered, Thomas. For them the realness of their faith and life collide when they are asked, "What does it mean for you to live in the light of the resurrection- when scripture says that death has no sting?" When in reality, for them and their loss, death has lots of sting. Death is real. Death is painful. They commented that they relate so well to Thomas because they need to see to believe. They have many unanswered questions and yet, their faith is extremely strong...even in the midst of their doubts...in the midst of the mystery of the resurrection.

That's the challenge of living a real and relevant faith today. Chris Thile, formerly of the band Nickel Creek, wrote the lyrics that Matt just sang sixteen or more years ago, "Please give me time to decipher the signs. Please forgive me for time that I've wasted. I'm a doubting Thomas. I'll take your promise. Though I know nothing's safe. O' me of little faith." I wish I could have coffee with Chris Thile because in sixteen years ago a lot can happen, and I would ask him to tell me more about what these lyrics meant to him now. There are many times in our faith when we don't have all the answers, and we need time to discern what we

believe. If nothing else, maybe Thomas reassures us that “faith doesn’t have to be straightforward; the business of accepting the resurrection, of living it out, of sharing it with the world, is tough. It’s okay to waver. It’s okay to take our time. It’s okay to hope for more” (Thomas). We’re told in Matthew’s Gospel that we only need the faith of a mustard seed to believe (17:20). John’s desire for his readers was that they would come to believe. Faith is not a decision once and for all, but a decision made in every situation. “John chose an encounter between doubts and scars to help us come to belief. Though we are a Easter people, we are also a people who experience pain- woundedness” (Thomas). None of us are promised safe. We aren’t promised that bad things won’t happen nor that we’ll live a long life. What we’re promised through Christ is God’s peace, forgiveness, and the power of the Holy Spirit to accompany us as we’re sent out into this world to live out Christ’s mission. When Jesus met Thomas right where he was on his faith journey, Thomas experienced grace first-hand when Jesus reached out a wounded hand. “The grace of divine kindness meeting him right where he was, even though he hid himself away. And that’s how it works. That’s how any of this works. We are neither alone nor unreachable in our hideouts. Locked rooms- doubt- death- nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! There’s no hiding from the relentless pursuit of grace. The risen Christ meets us where we prefer to hide, challenging our wounded reality and resurrecting faith to give life in his name” (caitlinrussell.org).

After Thomas confesses his belief, Jesus asks him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v.29). “He was talking about us, you know” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always A Guest*). If you’re finding the good news of Easter difficult to access right

now, rest in the fact that Thomas took his time. Marinate in the amazing truth that Jesus and Thomas' community allowed him the space to be wary and skeptical. Believe it or not, there is tremendous hope, grace and freedom in the mystery of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Peace be with you. Amen.