

April 12, 2015
2nd Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

ROOM FOR DOUBT

Poor old Doubting Thomas. Isn't it one of those stories that every child who goes to Sunday School knows well by the time they're in middle school at the latest. And Doubting Thomas has become a derogatory term in the broader culture for anyone who is a nay-sayer. You know, a group of young people is sitting around one night, really tired of their low-paying jobs, or their boring classes and someone says "you know, we ought to just move to New York, we can all pitch in and rent an apartment, work in the service industry and just start going to auditions and get an agent and just do it." And everybody is getting pumped about the idea, but one person is like: I don't know. We can barely pay our rent and utilities in Tallahassee and everybody else is like: O don't be a doubting Thomas. Until the next morning anyway when reality sets back in. I'm pretty sure I had multiple such conversations when I was barely out of high school. And I actually know someone who just took off and went to New York with even less of a plan. They didn't stay very long. In any event, the doubting Thomases of the world are usually not known as the life of the party types.

The fact is, Thomas has gotten a bad rap. No one else in this story or ever since can claim any high ground. Think about what was going on. Thomas and the others that are holed up in the locked room, had been an integral part of a new and exciting social and political movement. They had a leader like the world had never seen before and he was making things happen. They had been traveling around the country promoting a new kind of society where the poor were cared for, sinners were forgiven, immigrants were welcomed, the sick and wounded were healed. They had a huge following. People thought there was going to be a whole new world where justice and freedom reigned in place of discrimination, oppression and brutality.

Then, this one man on whom all hopes had been laid, gets arrested, humiliated, tortured and publicly executed. Everyone knew he was dead.

Imagine being Thomas, a member of the inner circle of this recently great movement that is now in disarray. You've always been the cautious one, but you've always been completely loyal and committed to the cause and to the man. Then you watch him die and three days later, you go to a meeting of the other leaders of the movement to figure out if there is any way to keep going, and they tell you they have seen Jesus. He has talked to them. The tomb where his body had been laid is empty. You, like Thomas, would probably think that their extreme anguish had caused a collective hallucination.

So, let's not be critical of Thomas for doubting before he encountered the risen Lord in the same way the other disciples had. Remember the Easter morning story we read last week. Mary Magdalene was the first person to discover that the tomb was empty. She stood there crying because she was sure that the body had been taken by grave robbers. When she first encountered the risen Lord, she didn't even recognize him. Until he called her by name. Then she believed.

And how about the other 10 who had been gathered together that first time Jesus appeared in the locked room? They had heard Mary's testimony. The first part—that the tomb was empty—had been corroborated by Peter and John. But apparently no one believed her when she told them she had actually seen Jesus and he had spoken words of comfort and hope to her. They didn't believe any more than Thomas did until they encountered the risen Lord themselves. But once they did, they knew, without any need for further explanation.

Thomas is no different. As soon as Jesus speaks to him, he knows. All those gruesome medieval and renaissance paintings with Thomas sticking his hand in the wounds have it wrong. Thomas doesn't accept Jesus' invitation touch the wounds. All doubt is gone. He needs no further persuasion, he falls to his knees and

proclaims Jesus as his Lord and his God. With this encounter, Thomas' life is changed forever.

This story is not a warning or chastisement to doubters. You see, Thomas is not the seeker here. Thomas' doubt didn't cause him to demand a rational explanation from Jesus. It's really just the opposite. It is Jesus who is determined to reach the insistent skeptic. It is Jesus who refuses to let dead bolts or grave stone block the movement of grace toward the unbeliever.

Writing about this passage, Serene Jones, the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, says that every Christian knows the condition of doubt. That may be an exaggeration. I know some who have told me they have never doubted and I believe them. But most of us do, I think. I know I do. But the story of Thomas tells us that when doubt happens, when doubt begins to crowd out hope, we can be confident and comforted because Jesus can move through the walls we build up by our own doings and by the worldly powers all around us. Jesus will meet us where we are, even when where we are is at the far edge of a faith that has been lost, damaged or neglected.

This is big. We have this strange thing to hold on to. That thing is a certainty that answers our most profound and desperate questions about life and truth; answers that come not because we seek them, but because God comes seeking us. Stepping through walls to offer love and grace even when it seems we have nothing but an unbelievable story to believe in. There is plenty of room for doubt and for God's grace through Jesus Christ, in the same place, at the same time.