

Sermon

Rev. David Martin, Deacon

St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Sunday, April 28, 2019

John 20:19-31

No Doubt Is Just the Name of Gwen Steafani's Band – Not a Commandment

Good morning, my friends. Do you have any doubts? I sure do. I freely admit that my mind is constantly full of doubts. Yes, as an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church, each and every day I've got doubts about my faith.

So how about you? Do you have doubts? Do you have any questions about God? About Jesus? About the resurrection we joyfully celebrated last week? About the commandments in the Bible? Do you have doubts about the inherent goodness of God when there is so much evil and violence in the world? Do you doubt your faith when someone you love is sick? When someone you love dies?

In my humble opinion, if you don't have any doubts then you really aren't paying attention.

Today's Gospel lesson revolves Jesus making a couple of appearances to his disciples after his resurrection. The featured player is Thomas who travels a journey of doubt and faith in today's scripture. We are told that Thomas is called "the Twin." Let's each imagine we are Thomas' twin, and we take that journey of doubt and faith with Thomas today.

Jesus enters a locked room and greets the disciples. They are scared but thrilled to Jesus has indeed risen from the dead. Unfortunately, one of Jesus' close friends, Thomas, is not in the room that night. Where was he? Was he alone in his grief somewhere? Was he trying to distance himself from the followers of Jesus? Was he doubting the wisdom of spending three years following a teacher who was now dead and gone?

When Thomas met the disciples again, they told him of the miraculous appearance of Jesus in that room. Thomas' response is doubt. He responds he will not believe Jesus is back unless he sees it for himself. Specifically, Thomas wants to see the crucifixion wounds in Jesus body and actually place his hands in those wounds.

Jesus was happy to oblige. Thomas was with the disciples when Jesus appeared in that locked room again. Jesus invites Thomas to examine his wounds and put his fingers in them. Thomas is now convinced and proclaims Jesus to be his "Lord and God." Thomas is actually the first of the disciples who is recorded as saying this.

Then Jesus offers what is most often viewed as a rebuke of Thomas. Jesus asks, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And thus, Thomas is somewhat demonized and referred to throughout history as "Doubting Thomas."

Poor Thomas gets a bad rap. But if you look at his journey through the Gospel of John, you'll see he's with Jesus all the way.

In Chapter 11, Jesus wants to visit his sick friend Lazarus, and his sisters, Mary, and Martha. The disciples advise against journeying to Judea because the authorities are against Jesus and want to stone him.

Thomas stands by Jesus and says “Let us also go that we may die with him.” Does that sound like someone who doesn’t believe? Does that sound like the words of a doubter?

In Chapter 14, Jesus talks with his friends about his impending death. Jesus tell them he is going to prepare a place for them and that they know the way to the place he is going. Thomas quickly says “Jesus, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas’ intelligent and eager question allows Jesus to respond “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” If Thomas didn’t believe, would he have been so eager to actually ask Jesus how they were supposed to take a journey that will allow them follow him?

Poor Thomas. You see, he really wasn’t such a bad guy. But throughout history, someone who doesn’t believe something is called a ‘Doubting Thomas.’

Interestingly, this story about Thomas’ journey encountering the risen Jesus only appears in the Gospel of John. It does not appear in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Even more unusual is that we read this same story every year on the Sunday after Easter. Our Lectionary runs in a three-year cycle. We alternate scriptures throughout those three years so we cover all of the important stories in the Bible. But this scripture is read every single year. The church finds this story of Thomas so important to our faith journey that it is read once a year even though it only appears once in the Bible. Now why would that be?

I suppose one could think that we are being told not to doubt anything. Just believe it.

I doubt that’s the reason.

I think the story of Thomas’ journey and his reluctance to believe Jesus is actually back among the living is repeated so that we know doubting something is OK. It’s in our DNA. It’s our human nature.

20<sup>th</sup> century German-American Christian philosopher Paul Tillich said, “Doubt it not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.”

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Paul Tillich is regarded by many evangelicals as an atheist for such a radical view. What do you mean doubt is part of faith? Faith is believing. How can one doubt and believe at the same time? Gee, I know I can walk and chew gum at the same time. I pretty sure all of us can doubt and have faith at the same time. Tillich is telling us that listening without thought to what someone tells you and never questioning the reason you are being told something is not faith. It is being a lemming. It is blindly following just because might be the easiest thing to do. It is being controlled.

When disciples told Thomas, they had seen Jesus back from the dead, perhaps it wasn’t doubt Thomas was expressing when he said he’d only believe it if he saw it for himself. I think Thomas wanted an opportunity to experience the living Christ himself. He simply didn’t want to take his friends’ word for it. His faith wasn’t in doubt, but his journey required him to experience the living Christ – as his friends had already done - for himself.

If we simply follow everything we are told without question, we are being denied our own experience with the living Christ. We are not taking our own journey but piggy-backing on someone else’s journey. Repeating again from Paul Tillich, “Doubt it not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.”

God gave us minds to think and consider and reason and question. God doesn't expect us to check our brains at the door when we go to church.

There was a movie released in 1975 called, The Stepford Wives. It's based on a book of the same name by Ira Levin and tells the story of the idyllic Connecticut suburb of Stepford. All the wives there behave and dress in a manner pleasing to their husbands. They are void of any original thoughts or emotions. 45-year-old spoiler alert: all the wives have been replaced with robots! We are not called to be Stepford Christians who are programmed to sit, smile, and nod obediently at a sermon - or at the reading of the Bible - or at the bedside of a dying loved one.

Back to Thomas: when he does see Jesus, although Jesus invites Thomas to physically touch his crucifixion wounds, the scripture does not indicate Thomas actually did so. Being in the presence of the resurrected and living Christ was enough for Thomas to proclaim he believed Jesus was Lord and God.

This past Wednesday I had an incredible theological discussion with a 5-year-old boy who attends St. Mark's Montessori School. I was in the narthex as families were arriving to drop their kids off for the day. I greeted my young friend and his 4-year-old sister who also attends school here. The boy walked over to me. He looked so serious and extremely concerned as he said, "Deacon David, my sister doesn't believe God is real."

Boom! 8:00 on a Wednesday morning and I'm called to discuss the existence of God with a 5-year-old. That is definitely a major rest stop on my own faith journey.

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To the best of my ability, I'll paraphrase my response, "That's OK, buddy. As we grow up, we've got lots of questions about all sorts of things. Your sister can certainly have questions about God. That's why we go to chapel. So, we can hear stories about God, sing songs about God, ask questions about God. God doesn't expect us to believe absolutely everything we hear. God wants us to be curious. And as we grow, we all learn and believe things at different times and in different ways."

My friend smiled and seemed satisfied. He then asked me if I knew about "that devil" and if he was sometimes called "the King of Thorns." As he walked away, he informed me he had brought a Pop-Tart for a snack that day. He clearly had a great day ahead of him.

Just like Thomas believed when he was in the presence of Jesus, my faith was increased being in the presence of that young Montessori student on Wednesday morning. My journey took an unexpected turn that day.

At the end of today's Gospel, Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Instead of a scolding of Thomas, I think we can look at it this way: Jesus tells Thomas he's so glad he's on board now. Through his journey of doubt and faith, Thomas has joined the others who will spread the Good News to the world. But Jesus then imagines how amazing it will be for all those who will not have the opportunity to see him in the flesh but through their own journeys of faith and doubt will come to believe in the love of God through Jesus.

This story about Thomas isn't instructing us to believe everything we are told. Not at all. Thomas asked questions. Thomas experiences the living Christ himself and then spread the gospel to the world. Thomas took his journey and likewise we experience the living Christ in the people we meet as we travel our journey. Like St. Mark's Montessori students, we hear stories about God, sing songs about God, ask questions about God.

Our faith is a journey. We are constantly growing, inquiring, learning, asking, rejoicing, doubting...

Will this journey ever end? I doubt it.