

A Closer Look at Doubt

Sunday, April 11, 2021

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to 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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The readings for the Sunday after Easter often include the account of "Doubting Thomas," and I must confess that over the years I had become very weary of that passage. My weariness was a result of my having heard too many misguided sermons on Thomas. It seemed that Thomas's moment of doubt was being interpreted in two opposite and equally incorrect ways. There were those who scorned Thomas as one of inferior faith and questionable moral character, and those who hailed Thomas as an intellectual hero who refused to blindly follow, but instead asked the hard questions and would not believe unless he saw solid evidence. Truth be told, Thomas was neither of these two, but was an ordinary disciple, much like you or me, who in

the end proved to be one of extraordinary faith! This post-Resurrection event provides us with a priceless lesson in the meaning of doubt and of faith. (And before I get further into the message, let me offer a word of praise for our Sunday school as a lesson on Thomas from a month ago stimulated my thinking about this wonderful man of doubt and faith.)

Thomas is commonly presented as one who demanded to see the evidence before believing that Christ has risen, but Thomas was actually longing for much more than physical evidence. We think of Thomas as the doubter, but at that time, just days after Jesus' betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection, he could more accurately be described as Thomas the traumatized. At face value his declaration marks him as a doubter. *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.* But Thomas's problem was much more a matter of the heart. He was an anguished man, weighed down with guilt and shame knowing how he had deserted his Lord in His hour of need. He was full of fear, for his present safety, for the future, and for the anger which he assumed Jesus must have held against him.

Thomas's presenting problem may have been doubt, but he was struggling with much greater pains. On several occasions I have discussed faith with people who presented themselves as doubters, but were in actuality hurting people. Their stated doubts may have had to do with intellectual controversies, but their actual concerns were aching questions of how God could have allowed such pain and tragedy in their lives, or other terrible injustices in our world.

Thomas was traumatized, and what he needed most was Christ's presence and assurance which the other disciples had received but he had missed. On the day of Resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples, minus Thomas, and said *Peace be with you*. This was much more than a polite greeting. Jesus was telling the disciples that though they had sinned terribly by deserting and even denying Him in His hour of need, He still loved them and felt only peace toward them. With this assurance and word of immeasurable grace the disciples felt alive again, but Thomas was not there to receive this healing word. Certainly, the disciples told Thomas of this blessing from Christ, but without being there and receiving that blessing he could not bring himself to believe. Again, I say, the doubter's greatest need may not be information, but love, healing and restoration.

Thomas's doubting was short lived. He would see Jesus and would receive Christ's blessing, and his life would be transformed. The guilt, anguish and fear would suddenly disappear. And then what? Did Thomas say, "Hey, what do you know? You guys were right after all! Now here is the \$50 I owe you guys on the bet that we made!?" Of course not. The matter of Thomas's doubt and the truth of the Resurrection were much more than a concern for who was correct and who was incorrect. The Resurrection was an event which demanded a response, and Thomas

wasted no time in offering that response. *Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"* Thomas knew that if Jesus was risen, then truly He was God and deserving of full obedience and devotion. Thomas was now willing to follow any instruction which Jesus would give, and his confession was one which the other disciples were not heard to make!

Thomas presents us with a lesson in faith and its full dimensions. By Thomas's example we see three dimensions to genuine faith. **First** is the **intellectual dimension** and the **need to know the Truth**. I have spoken of Thomas's great need to be comforted and assured, but this is not to ignore the importance of the facts of our faith. If the world is to come to belief in Christ, they must know the facts and truths involved. Some may be quick to say that we must simply love people into the Kingdom, and that the details of the Gospel story and the Bible do not matter nearly as much. But the truth and the facts do matter. We must also bear in mind that our world is becoming increasingly ignorant of the content and meaning of the Good News. Biblical illiteracy only grows as a pervasive problem for the American Church and for the wider society. People need to be informed. Too many think that they know what Christian faith is all about, when in actuality they only have vague notions of love or morals, but do not really understand our God or the Good News. This has been one of the great blessings of the *Alpha* ministry which takes time to teach basic faith to an increasingly uninformed world. People need to hear, not only of God's love, but of sin and the seriousness of the human ailment, and God's plan in Christ to restore us. We need to know the whole Truth!

Thomas was glad to discover the truth about the Risen Jesus, but he was even more glad to discover that Jesus who is **the Truth, loved him**. This is the next key element in the life of faith, and in receiving that loving affirmation from Jesus Thomas's life was changed. The world may occasionally speak in religious ways and may affirm that if there is a god, this god is very loving, and the world may all nod their heads in agreement. But deep in their hearts doubts and fears run rampant through our world and most folks do not seriously believe that they are loved and received by a righteous God. It is our task to see that the world comes to know the love of Jesus and experiences that love through word and deed. The world is dying for love. Like Thomas, they need to be touched by divine love if they are to come to a full faith.

Thomas also demonstrates for us a third essential, and often overlooked aspect of faith, and that is **the need to respond to the call of the Truth**. Truth demands a response. Too often we view matters of faith and doctrine as intellectual entertainment, and our deepest response to discovering a new biblical truth is to say, "Well what do you know! Isn't that interesting?" The Bible is a fascinating book, but it was not given to us for our amusement. Truth requires a response. Thomas knew this, and upon his realization that Jesus was risen, and truly was God's Son, gave a heartfelt word of response and commitment. *My Lord and my God!* As Thomas viewed the matter, once the truth was known time was wasting. Now was the moment to do the

right thing and seize this holy mission as his own. Now was the time to follow as fully as was possible.

We live in an era when few are in a hurry to make a commitment. I find it amusing that we live in the day of the long engagement. When a young couple realizes that they were meant for each other they frequently take years to commit to marriage, and when they do, the engagement period often extends for years. When Kay agreed to marry me, I saw no reason for delay and in six months we were hitched. By my way of thinking a long engagement would only give her time to find someone better and to change her mind. I suppose this line of thinking runs in my family. At my father's services I heard three different men comment that many years earlier they had their eye on Charlotte, but dad got to her first! I may be speaking in humorous terms, but in matters of faith this is serious business. He who hesitates is lost, and when the Lord presents Himself to us or calls us to special service, do not delay! Tomorrow may be too late.

We think of Thomas as the doubter, and for a moment he was, but he was actually an exemplar of faith! His was a full and complete faith as he came to know the Truth, the assurance that the Truth knew and loved him, and he saw the need for a full and faithful response to such love. Let us also remember that Thomas offers us a valuable lesson in doubting. Doubt is a natural thing. How can we not doubt and ask questions as life is so full of matters which we struggle to understand? Thomas showed us the best kind of doubter. As I see it, there are two kinds of doubters. There is the **selfish doubter** and there is the **true seeker**. Thomas was a true seeker as his doubt led him to truth which he readily embraced. True seekers actually want to know what is right and are willing to do whatever the truth requires once they find it.

Not all seekers are true seekers. The selfish seeker claims to be seeking the truth, but in actuality is not a seeker at all. There are many selfish seekers in our world, and the world often idolizes them as bold and deep thinkers. To this day we feel deep admiration for the great philosophers of ancient Greece. Their study and insights did shape and guide Western civilization and culture, but were they truly seekers. When Paul visited Athens, these great minds were described by Luke as men who *spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.* (Acts 17:21) They believed themselves to be great seekers of truth, but in actual fact they were merely amusing themselves with the latest thoughts. In his Second Letter to Timothy Paul warned against those presenting themselves as great seekers of truth who were *always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.* (3:7) These selfish seekers parade their questions and doubts before the world as though they are seeking truth, but for them it is more of a game, and if they were to find truth, would not dare embrace it, for the truth would require something from them. These "great thinkers" live their lives comfortably seated on the sidelines and their questions become a way of avoiding work and responsibility.

I recently spoke with a man who said that he had many questions about life and faith, and felt the need to occasionally apologize for all his inquiries. I felt that his questions were very good questions. He seriously considered whatever information he gathered from these questions, and always sought to be a positive part of his faith family. He showed all the signs of a true seeker. To illustrate the characteristics of a true or a selfish seeker to those who are uneasy with their many questions, I like to tell this tale of True Thomas and Bad Thomas. Suppose you were the leader of a project at your work and you were supervising a team of a dozen workers. Among this team was Bad Thomas and True Thomas, and these two Thomases had lots of questions. Early in the project Bad Thomas loudly announced that he had questions, and proceeded to list the many doubts which he had about this project. Seeing this as an opportunity to keep the group focused and informed you explained carefully the whys and wherefores of the project. But the more you explained, the more questions were asked, and the less Bad Thomas seemed to be listening. It was also obvious that Bad Thomas was not working very hard, and as the project progressed, he became even lazier. Whenever confronted about this lack of effort Bad Thomas would raise questions about the project, as if his doubts exempted him from work.

True Thomas asked almost as many questions as Bad Thomas, but he was a very different Thomas! Early in the project you had a long talk with True Thomas and explained everything as best as you could. True Thomas still had questions in the coming days, but he asked graciously, listened carefully, and when he still did not understand gave you the benefit of the doubt. What really set True Thomas apart was the he was a hard and loyal worker. At times his questions may have seemed annoying, but it soon was obvious that True Thomas was your best and most treasured employee! True Thomas could occasionally be called a doubter, but he was a great doubter to have on board!

Thomas offers a lesson in a true faith which seeks and embraces the truth, rejoices to be embraced by that loving Truth, and delights to serve as the Truth leads. It is a shame that Thomas, after just one bump on his road of faith, should be known as Doubting Thomas. Oh, that we all had that faith of this dear and wonderful doubter!