

Honest Doubt and Dishonest Faith

John 20: 19-31

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First Federated Church

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I like Thomas. If I had a patron saint, he may even be mine! He's gotten a bum rap over the years. He is usually called "Doubting Thomas." So quickly we forget that Thomas alone, of all of the disciples, stood beside Jesus when he turned his face toward Jesus for the last time. All of the other disciples tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem and a certain death, it was Thomas who stood up and said, "Let us go, too, that we may die with him." (John 11:16) You've got to admire his *moxie*!

He was the *one* who would not settle for a second-hand, hand-me-down faith. On the first Easter night, when the disciples were huddled together in a room behind locked doors and windows, the risen Lord appeared to them. "Peace be with you," he said and he blew the Holy Spirit into them not unlike God blowing the breath of Life into the first human in Genesis chapter 2.

Thomas was not with them. When the disciples saw Thomas they told him what had happened but he would not believe them. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in 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."

Thomas refused to "check" the gray matter between his ears at the door. He had *honest* doubts about what the disciples told him. Rather than be silent, he expressed his opinion. I admire that. I have something in common with Thomas in that regard. When people go to seminary there is often a "faith crisis" sometime during their first year as they are exposed to all kinds of what is called "higher biblical criticism." The Bible is seriously examined and dissected. Seminarians are exposed to all kinds of new ideas and often there comes a point where they feel as if the very foundations of their faith has been destroyed. During their second year of seminary they are often in a faith wilderness. But their third and final year, though, they have often rebuilt their faith structure. It may or may not look like the faith structure that they came to seminary with, but now it is a structure that they understand because they have built it with their own hands.

Now, to be perfectly honest, I never experienced crippling doubt in seminary. If anything, I had just the opposite experience. This is partly because I'm a bit jaded. I was never impressed by a *creationism* that relied upon statistical odds to prove the existence of God. You know, one that looks at say the intricacy of the human eye and says that the likelihood of its development being an accident is 10 billion to one. I was always of the mindset that said that maybe we were lucky on the roulette table of Life. I was the kid who once asked my fourth grade Sunday School teacher, in all sincerity, "If Adam and Eve were the first two people and if they had two sons, does that mean that there was incest?" My poor teacher! She didn't know what to say other than to tell me to ask the minister. Well, ministers were largely unapproachable back then.

I personally found a serious exploration of the Bible to be highly liberating. I still do.

The difference between a *dishonest faith* and *honest doubt* is that a *dishonest faith* never presses, never questions, never wonders. *Honest doubt*, on the other hand, is

like that Old Testament patriarch Jacob who wrestled with God on the banks of the Jabbak until he received not only a blessing but a new name. After that night he was no longer Jacob the Heel Grabber, but Israel whose name literally means “one who wrestles or strives with God.”

Honest doubt is not intimidated by the hard questions of life. It wrestles with them and in the process discovers a blessing because it stands in awe of the mysteries of God.

As our gospel lesson continues, one week later the disciples gathered once again in that room and this time Thomas was with them. The risen Lord once again appeared but this time he spoke to them again. “Peace be with you,” he said. Then, turning to Thomas, he said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas replied, “My Lord and my God.!”

I find this story fascinating on at least three different levels. **First, Thomas did not allow his doubts, his questions to keep him from the fellowship of the disciples—the Church.** So often when the things that we learned in Sunday School do not match with our life experiences or when the lessons of childhood are challenged by an adult understanding, we shut down intellectually and walk away. We say to ourselves, “If I cannot believe this simple childlike faith, then what can I believe?” Thomas did not do this. **He did not allow his doubts to keep him from the community of faith.**

Second, the disciples—the Church—did not feel threatened by Thomas’ presence. They did not demand blind acceptance. They were not intimidated by Thomas’ doubts. As a matter of fact, they embraced him.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Thomas saw the experienced the Resurrected Lord when he was in fellowship with the community of faith. Jesus once promised his disciples at another place and another time, *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst.*

None of us knows what the future holds. But I know that it is the hope and the prayer of everyone gathered here today that God’s richest blessings will be upon you. And, it is my hope and prayer, that you will grow to have a robust and vital faith—a true faith that doesn’t demand certainty but that is able to embrace life’s great mysteries. It is my prayer that you will always know the One whose love will never let you go.

To God be the glory. Amen.