

2 Easter
April 24, 2022

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Is there room for the curious ... those with questions ... or even someone with doubts ... is there room for a skeptic in the Church today? What is the Church to do with those who are seeking a faith experience yet feel as if the Church is not a safe place to ask questions? When you have a curiosity about what the Bible says, or a preacher’s interpretation of Holy Scripture ... including mine ... do you feel safe in expressing your query?

We just heard the story of the appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples in a locked room on the evening of the first Easter. According to John’s gospel, earlier that day, before dawn, Mary Magdalene had gone by herself to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body but had found the tomb empty. She then went and told Peter and another disciple that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb, also found it empty, but were confused by what had happened and what it might mean. The author of John’s gospel put it this way, “... for they did not understand the scriptures, that he must rise from the dead.”

Peter and the other disciple left the tomb, but Mary Magdalene stayed weeping. Then she saw two angels, and then someone she thought was the gardener. The man Mary mistook for the gardener said, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She turned around and realized that the man wasn’t the gardener at all, but the risen Jesus. She then went and told her story to the disciples.

Over two thousand years later we know the story very well. I think we know it so well that we fail to imagine what the experience might really have been like for those who were close to Jesus. Some of this I mentioned last week on Easter Sunday, but the disciples and the others who followed Jesus must have been full of grief at the death of Jesus. I imagine they were also fearful that they could possibly suffer the same fate as he did ... death on a cross. Some may have been angry ... possibly feeling betrayed. This wasn’t the outcome they had expected when they followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Now, they were confused. His body was not in the tomb, and Mary Magdalene has now reported that she has seen Jesus alive.

So, can you imagine the conversations they had among themselves on the day they found the empty tomb? With so little information they could only guess at what this meant, and what was in front of them. Then, that evening, the disciples gathered in a house ... the doors were

locked ... and the risen Jesus appeared to all of them. He appeared to all of them except Thomas ... who for some unknown reason was not with the other disciples.

We always read about Thomas's encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the Sunday after Easter ... and I believe most preachers cast it in derogatory or pejorative terms. Thomas is most famously known as "Doubting Thomas" ... the cynic ... the skeptic ... the holdout. His reluctance to accept the testimony of his fellow disciples ... his insistence on physical proof ... his late arrival to the joyous belief of his peers ... these are often described as spiritual flaws. They are characterized as signs of stubbornness ... or of a weak faith. Thomas belongs to the band of disciples of Jesus, yet openly voices his doubts. Let's face it, Thomas often gets a bad rap in the Church.

However, weakness is not what I see in Thomas. I see a man who yearned for a living encounter with 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 all too certain.

What strikes me most about Thomas's story is not that he doubted, but that he did so publicly, without shame or guilt, and that his faith community allowed him to do so. Moreover, what I love about Jesus' response is that he met Thomas right where he was, freely offering the disciple the testimony of his own wounds ... his own pain. After such an encounter, I can only imagine the tenderness and urgency with which Thomas was able to repeat the risen Jesus' words to other doubters ... "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed."

I, for one, understand Thomas' skepticism. This story of encountering Jesus that the other disciples told Thomas was a little dubious after all. Yes, Thomas had heard that the Mary Magdalene had seen the risen Jesus ... but even she did not recognize him at first, thinking he was the gardener. But for Jesus to appear to the disciples in a locked room, as if he could just walk through the wall, was just a little over the top for Thomas. Maybe the disciples had seen an apparition. It doesn't surprise me that when Thomas was told of this encounter by the other disciples his response was to say, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in his side, I will not believe."

However, does Thomas's disbelief mean that he didn't have faith? For that matter, can a skeptic in any age, including our own, still find a place within the body of the faithful? I sometimes think of myself as among a group of modern day skeptics. Yet I also know that my skepticism has led me to curiosity ... and my curiosity has led to me to inquisitive exploration ... and that exploration has only deepened my faith.

The Greek words that are translated as "belief" and "faith" have the same root, but they are used in different ways. When Jesus encounters the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof, or the woman who had bleeding for 12 years, or blind Bartimaeus, or the woman of the city he tells them that their "faith" has "saved" them, or made them "well," or made them

“whole.” It is never perfectly clear what Jesus means by “faith” but it has something to do with trusting God.

On the other hand, the doubt of Thomas and others has to do with what seems to be an acceptance as objective reality of an incredulous claim. Feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish is an incredulous claim. Raising Lazarus from the grave after four days is an incredulous claim. Walking on water is an incredulous claim. Rising from the dead and appearing to the disciples in a locked room is an incredulous claim. So, in this scientific age can people have doubts about these claims in our Holy Scripture and still have faith?

My answer is yes! I’m not going to try to explain away these stories. I embrace them as “true” ... even if I don’t see them as literally, objective fact. Could you have video taped these events? I don’t think so. Do they report a reality experienced by the people who were witnesses? I’m sure of it. If that sounds contradictory ... it is. However, I believe that the truth is written between the lines as well as in black and white. Is there room for the faithful skeptic in the church community today? Yes ... at least for me ... just as there was room for doubters amongst the disciples.

Some contemporary Biblical scholars claim that there is a back-story to the attitude that the author of John’s gospel displays towards Thomas. Thomas is mentioned several times in John’s gospel, and on each occasion Thomas is pictured in a negative, derogatory, or pejorative way. When Jesus goes to Lazarus who had died, Thomas seems to miss the point. Later, when Jesus speaks of going to his “Father’s house” Thomas is pictured as ignorant and naive in not “knowing the way.” In the story we heard today Thomas is not with the disciples who are gathered in the room ... the implication is that Thomas had something better to do ... or he didn’t get the memo ... or that he had forgotten about the meeting ... or he was just too frightened to show up. And then Thomas expresses his doubt. Why might the author of John’s gospel imply these things about Thomas?

One theory put forth is that John’s and Thomas’s views of who Jesus was were at odds with one another ... that John and Thomas were from rival theological and ecclesial perspectives. What we do know is that in the early church, at the time of the writing of the gospels, there were several very different understandings of who Jesus was, and what the events of his life, death, and resurrection meant to those who were gathering in his name. Some people followed Peter and his understanding ... others followed John and his conception ... and still others followed Thomas. But what was it about Thomas’s insight into Jesus that would have threatened John?

In 1945 a Bedouin shepherd unearthed several pottery jars in Nag Hammadi, Egypt ... an area about 120 miles south of Cairo. Inside those pottery jars were a number of parchment scrolls. Among the documents discovered was an ancient copy of what was titled the “Gospel of Thomas” ... a collection of 114 “sayings” of Jesus, many of which are also found in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of Thomas has no narrative ... there is no birth story, no miracle stories, or stories of healings, or of his travels around Galilee. And the

Gospel of Thomas contains no account of his passion and resurrection ... it is just a collection of sayings ... as if it were a collection of quotes.

It is believed by most scholars today that this Gospel of Thomas was written and circulated before the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written. The Gospel of Thomas may have been written as early as 25 years after the death of Jesus. However, most scholars believe that John's gospel was written at least 60 to 70 years after the crucifixion.

For the Gospel of Thomas, it is what Jesus says, rather than what he does, that is primary. Salvation, for Thomas, comes from Jesus' teaching, not from his death and resurrection. Under this expression of early Christianity each individual has a divine spark, and consequently, all of us, every single individual, can represent the divine. Contemporary author Richard Rohr calls that divine spark the "Christ mystery."

However ... on the other hand ... John insists that salvation is only through Jesus the Christ. What Thomas sees as available to every individual, to every self, to every soul, John sees as only attributable to Jesus the Christ, the only Son of God, who died and rose again.

To this day both expressions can be found in the Christian faith, often sitting side-by-side. However, in the early church the theology we now take for granted was in its formative stage. Whether John, or Peter, or Thomas, they were all formulating answers to the questions that are still asked today. Who was Jesus? Was he fully human, fully divine, or both? Was his resurrection that of his body or of his spirit? And what do we have to "believe" to have a Christian faith?

The story of Doubting Thomas ends with the verse,

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Another way to say this is, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and are skeptics, and have lots of questions, yet still journey in faith."

So, what are your doubts? Of what are you skeptical? How has your disbelief caused you to be curious, and therefore driven you to explore your faith? What questions do you still harbor that cause you to wonder? What questions do you have that you may be afraid to voice? To what questions do you want clear answers rather than live in the discomfort ... the tension ... of not knowing? And finally, how have you not seen, yet still have faith on your journey?

Yes, there are some religions ... even expressions of Christianity ... that have all the answers, yet they don't allow any questions. In some expressions of our own faith, there is no room for questions, much less doubt. However, I find my curiosity, and the curiosity of others, to drive an exploration that deepens my faith. I encourage you to use your questions ... and doubts ... to do the same.

Amen.