

“Doubters Welcome”

As many of you realize we have a three-year cycle of readings for Sundays. One year each for Mark, Matthew and Luke with John sprinkled in liberally throughout each year. One of the few readings that we hear each year is the one we heard today about “Doubting Thomas.” This story is only told in the Gospel of John. In fact, Thomas only speaks in the Gospel of John and he does so in just three situations. Today’s reading is the longest and most powerful.

I find Thomas’ responses to be more questions than doubts. Everyone but him was present for Jesus’ first resurrection appearance. I can imagine that when the disciples say that Jesus appeared to them that they had to think they were pulling his leg. Remember there are two certainties in life—death and taxes. While tax laws change death is a constant. At least up until that time no one had been resurrected from death. When people die they stay dead. That is just the way it is. For Thomas to hear from his fellow disciples that Jesus appeared to them and that what’s more he did not even enter by the door had to sound like a ghost story, hallucination, or just a very cruel joke. I understand his disbelief.

As the days go by between Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples and the second one for which Thomas was present, I can also imagine that the other disciples might begin questioning what they had experienced. After all they had been holed up in that room for most of a week with crowds and worshippers milling about and contingents of soldiers marching by. Fear, cabin fever, and who knows what else would certainly have been play on their minds. They might have been thinking that Thomas was correct in his disbelief.

But when Jesus shows up again a week later I’m sure any reservations were disaffirmed. Jesus was real and alive. He had the wounds to prove it. That is, he was not a new remade Jesus without imperfection in a white robe with angels wings as in popular culture. He was the same man whose body had been broken on the cross who had been resurrected to new life through the love of God. Think about the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel. Those bones were reassembled and en fleshed again as something new and different. Although the resurrected Jesus was able to enter rooms without the need of doors, he still ate, his voice sounded the same, but there was something different about him because even his closest friends did not recognize him immediately.

All of that aside I find it interesting that each year we hear the story of Thomas’ disbelief and doubts. The Church writ large thinks it is something important for us to remember and ponder. Honestly I do not know what the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary had in mind for us. However, whatever their reasons I think it is wise for us to be reminded that even among Jesus’ closest friends and disciples confident belief in Jesus as the resurrected Son of God was not a given. Indeed, one had such strong misgivings that he

worked with the Roman overlords and religious opponents of Jesus to engineer his arrest in a dark and secluded garden away from the crowds that had been gathering around Jesus to hear him teach and preach.

Later, the man that Jesus called the Rock, that is Simon Peter, would vehemently deny knowing Jesus and even cursing those that accused him. The other disciples went into hiding. It was not a pretty sight.

Later when Jesus is about to ascend to heaven forty days after the resurrection, he commissions the disciples in the words that we call the Great Commission. As he is about to do so Matthew writes, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted.”¹ Even as he is about to be taken up into heaven having spent forty days with the disciples after the resurrection some, maybe all, are doubting.

We who have not seen the risen Christ and only have accounts written forty to sixty years after his crucifixion and resurrection are expected to believe and have no doubts? Certainly the disciples did, Thomas apparently the most prominent among them. It seems to me that doubting is part of being Christian. It was not in the tradition I was raised in. In that tradition doubting was the same as denying. Denying had one result which was an eternity of punishment.

The fact that the Gospels mention more than once that the disciples and others had doubts seems to me to welcome our doubts. Many of the psalmists rail at God for not watching over them more closely. Jacob actual wrestles with God all night long. The name that God gave the chosen people was not God’s faithful ones or some other laudatory title. God called them Israel which means struggles with God. If God’s chosen people, whom, by the way were never unchosen, can be called struggles with God I think we are in safe territory when we have and express our doubts.

Wrestle, struggle, doubt, and argue with God. You will not be betrayed or sentenced to perdition. You will become more clear in your beliefs. You will become more steadfast in your faith. You will become more fully the person God made you to be for that active struggle with the one who loves you more powerfully that you can ask or imagine.

¹ Matthew 28:16-17 NRSVUE