

“Do Not Doubt, But Believe”  
Deacon Bonnie LeValley

April 28, 2019  
John 20: 19-31

*John 20:19-31* <sup>19</sup>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.” <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>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.”

<sup>26</sup>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.” <sup>27</sup>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.” <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup>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.” <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>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 tomb is empty, Christ is risen, death has been defeated, love wins, we’re a resurrection people, and nothing on earth will ever be the same again. Right? Right? Welcome to the week after. The week after Easter lilies, tulips, egg hunts, brunches, baptisms, and alleluias. This is the point in the liturgical year when we take a good, hard look at God’s post-resurrection world, and think, “Now what?” Or, if we’re brutally honest: “*So what?*” The week after always seems to be messy, murky and complicated where there are appointments, illnesses, family fights and struggles, deaths, surgeries, so much more! We are not the first to struggle with life, and we won’t be the last.

Thomas struggled! The story of Thomas has always been one of my favorites. I have always been a champion for the underdog! Of course, it’s not just a story about Thomas. It’s also a story about frightened disciples. So scared, in fact, that, they hid behind locked doors. And who can blame them? They had just witnessed the one they confessed to be the Messiah betrayed by one of his own, tried and

convicted by both religious and civil authorities, and then brutally crucified. Little wonder they were afraid, assuming that the next step would be to round up Jesus' followers. But when Jesus comes on the scene, their fear falls away and is replaced by joy.

This is the way many of us assume faith should work. Yes, perhaps you've got doubts and questions and fears, but then God arrives and those all fall away, replaced by joy and wonder and, of course, unshakeable faith. But that's not the way it works with Thomas. He questions. He disbelieves. He's not satisfied with second-hand reports and wants to see for himself. And again, who can blame him? He was, after all, one of those who saw his Lord and friend mistreated, beaten, and then crucified and has probably spent the last few days pulling the pieces of his life back together, trying to figure out what to do next. In fact, he might have already started getting on with his life – he was the only one out and about when the rest of the disciples are hiding behind locked doors.

So here's what I'm wondering a few days after a joyous Easter: do we make room for the Thomas's in our world? I suspect that there are millions of Thomas's, even some who worshipped with us on Easter Sunday. There are probably many Thomas's here today returning to see if they can catch a glimpse of the Risen Christ. Thomas does come to believe. He sees Jesus for himself. And after that experience he not only consents to the witness of his fellow disciples but makes the most profound confession of faith about Jesus contained in the New Testament, calling Jesus "my Lord and my God," bookending the confession in John 1 where the eternal word that becomes flesh is not only with God but is God!

All of that comes after he has a chance to voice his doubt. And sometimes faith is like that – it needs the freedom of questions and doubt to really spring forth and take hold. Otherwise, faith might simply be confused with a repetition of creedal formulas, or giving your verbal consent to the faith statements of others. A true, vigorous, vibrant faith comes, I think, from the freedom to question, wonder, and doubt. Not for everyone, of course. For some, faith comes more easily. Maybe many of the other disciples were like that (although let's not forget that they got to see Jesus hands and feet, what Thomas asked for!). But for others it's harder.

To tell you the truth, I have no idea what the other disciples thought of Thomas' initial skepticism. Maybe they were scandalized. Or maybe they sympathized. I suspect that John's whole point in including this story in his Gospel is to affirm the faith of his community, a group of people who "had not seen yet believed." If nothing else, Thomas reassures me that faith doesn't have to be straightforward;

the business of accepting the resurrection, of living it out, of sharing it with the world, is tough. It's okay to take our time. It's okay to hope for more.

Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis shares this about Thomas, We are so captivated by his disbelief because it validates our own. We are thankful for his need for proof because it justifies our deepest desires for evidence of an empty tomb. We admire his willingness to speak up for what he needs in order to believe because, if we are honest, for the most part we are all too comfortable in our allegiance to and acceptance of doctrine which in the end means nothing.

We don't speak up. We don't speak up for the things we need, the things that matter, the things promised to us, the things about which we think we can't or won't speak up because who will listen? Will anything change? So we stay silent for ourselves and others. Someone else will say something, right? Surely someone else will speak up. Someone else will speak up for me. This is what we like about Thomas what we admire about him. He asks for what he needs, for what Jesus had already promised. For what Jesus promises every believer. Thomas have a good memory.

Back in John 14: “‘And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’”

Show us the way! We don't know the way! We wonder what Thomas thought after that. Maybe he took Jesus seriously. Maybe he thought he could. So when the disciples say to Thomas, “Guess what? We saw the Lord!” Thomas is thinking to himself, “Well, that's just great! Jesus did say he was the way. I remember that. And when we were talking about the way, well, that meant Jesus was preparing an abiding place for me. And how can I know an abiding place with him without being with him?”

"I mean, wait a minute. Mary saw the Lord. The other disciples saw the Lord. It's not that I need proof. I just need to be with him. Because that's what it means that he's the way, right? Jesus' way does not mean I'm left out. That's not how I heard it anyway. I didn't know where he was going and I didn't know the way. And then, he said *he* was the way. I need to feel that abiding place again. Because that's what the way is. I just need to be with you Jesus. To touch you, feel you, see you, hear you, taste you. One more time. I need to feel that abiding place again, I need to feel the way, again. One more time."

It seems Thomas found the way, but really, he knew it all along.

He knew the way was not a roadmap.

Instead he knew the way was being in the presence of your Lord and God -- and that's all he wanted. He wanted what Jesus said. He asked for what Jesus said you should. He needed what Jesus said is his -- always.

And in that moment he saw Jesus as your Lord *and* as your God. Wow.

Indeed, I think that if we don't ask questions, we're probably not taking the story seriously enough. Think about it! We confess: that the Creator of the universes not only knows we exist but cares deeply and passionately about our ups and downs, our hopes and dreams, and all the rest. This confession is in-credible! I often hear you say; my problems are so insignificant in light of the problems that others are going through, yet we proclaim that God hears them all! We come together and in hearing the Word and partaking of the Sacraments and by being joined to those around us through prayer and song, we come to believe. For some it's easy, for others, more difficult. For some, hearing the Scripture is enough. For others, they need something more personal and direct.

Jesus said when he appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. "Peace be with you..." With the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, this phrase that was a customary greeting of respect, took on new meaning. Peace be with you to those who doubt, Thomas. Peace be with you to those who have seen and believed, my disciples and friends. Peace be to those who have not seen yet have come to believe, my beloved church throughout the ages and today.

Thomas asked the questions he asked for his needs to be met and Jesus blesses him! Questions, wonder, and doubt are signs of interest and searching and these, quite often, are the soil in which vibrant faith is born. These questions are the very thoughts that lead us on our way! Thomas comes to faith because he first has the chance to voice his doubt and needs. Perhaps today we should be more like Thomas and voice our questions, our searching. Then we will be on "The Way." A relationship with Jesus the Risen Christ! Amen!

## Mark of the nails

*“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.”*

—John 20.25

You want to see *real* resurrection,  
not its paperwork. You want to *touch* it.  
And you know where to look.  
Ignore your packaged and trimmed doctrine,  
don't even look in your slick success stories.  
Look in your wounds.  
Reach out and put your hand in your losses,  
the mark of your shame.  
Where is it empty?  
Where does your failure flop out of its costume  
and bleed all over the floor?  
Go ahead. Touch it.  
Put your hand on your inadequacy.  
The deepest wounds go deeper than you.  
Sit a while with the corpse of yourself.  
Wait there.  
Wait for what you can't wait for, can't ask for.  
Let that great emptiness open up in you.  
Let it be as vast as God,  
the wound divine,  
your anguish and your Beloved: one.  
There, where it's hopeless,  
that's where the hope is. Go there.  
Listen for the voice.

—April 24, 2019