

Witnesses of Easter

“Thomas”

[John 20:24-29](#)

Last Sunday, we heard the message of Easter through the story of Mary Magdalene found in the Gospel of John. We heard the witness of how she was the first person to encounter Jesus after his resurrection, how she was given the honor of delivering the good news to his disciples. On this second Sunday of Easter, we continue reading from John as we seek to hear the message of Easter again. This time, we hear it through the story of Thomas, one of Jesus' 12 disciples.

Even non-believers know something about Thomas. When we say his name, it's often said together with the description of “doubting.” And today's text shows us how he earned this dishonorable, dubious title.

On the day of his resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary early in the morning, and to his disciples later in the evening. We hear how the disciples are huddled together and still hiding in fear behind locked doors even after hearing the good news from Mary. Suddenly, Jesus comes and stands before them. “Peace be with you,” he says, meeting them where they are in their place of fear. And, he shows them he truly is their Master, the one who had been crucified, by revealing the wounds he bears on his hands and side. They were overjoyed, but they must have been fearful, too, knowing how they had run away and abandoned Jesus. So once again, he assures them by saying “Peace be with you.” And he lets them know that they are still his disciples, the ones he will send to the world, preaching God's message of forgiveness.

But, on the night that Jesus appeared to his disciples, Thomas was not there. The author of John's gospel doesn't give us a reason as to why he was missing. Who knows? Maybe, he had had enough. Maybe, he was thinking, ‘3 years of following the supposed Messiah up and down the Judean countryside, and *this* is the reward? Thanks, but no thanks.’

We know that the other disciples, who had just been received by Jesus Christ with open arms, are willing to do the same to their friend who has kept his distance from them. They tell him what he has missed. “We have seen the Lord,” they announce, repeating the same words Mary had announced to them. They probably told him about the nail marks they saw on Jesus' body and the comforting words Jesus had spoken to them. But, none of it mattered. Thomas refused to believe them. He said, *“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.”* With these words, Thomas has forever earned his nickname of “Doubting Thomas.”

Yet, it is quite unfair that Thomas is singled out as the lone doubter. Among Jesus' disciples and followers, he was not the only one to have doubts about Jesus' resurrection upon hearing about it. In fact, all the other witnesses of Easter did not believe without encountering the risen Christ personally.

According to the Gospel of Mark, three women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene saw that Jesus' tomb was empty. An angel in the empty tomb said to them that Jesus was risen and asked

them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they would see their risen Lord. But, they said nothing to anyone because they were too afraid.

And as we heard last Sunday, according to the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb and thought someone had stolen the body of Jesus. It was only when Jesus appeared to her that she believed in his resurrection. Actually, in her grief, she mistook the man who was speaking to her as a gardener. It was only when Jesus called her by name that Mary recognized the risen Lord.

We know that Mary rushed to the disciples and told them that she had seen the Lord. But, according to the Gospel of Mark, the disciples dismissed her words because they did not see him for themselves (Mark 16:11). It was only when Jesus appeared to them, showing them the wounds on his hands and side, that the disciples believed in his resurrection and rejoiced.

Clearly, Thomas was not the only one who had doubts and questions upon hearing the good news. Like everyone else, he wanted to see for himself. What sets him apart from the others is not his doubt, but his honesty! He can't help but honestly reveal what is on his mind.

Actually, this isn't the first time in John's Gospel where he speaks frankly. In chapter 14, at the last supper with his disciples, Jesus talks about going to the Father's house, where he will prepare a place for them there. When Jesus concludes by saying, "*You know the way to the place I am going.*" Thomas interrupts. He says, "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" And thank goodness that he does so because I am sure that none of the other disciples at the table understood Jesus' words. They probably had no clue as to what Jesus was talking about even as they were nodding along. But, Thomas was different. He had the courage to admit his ignorance. He had the courage to ask questions in order to learn, to seek the truth.

We wouldn't be honest with ourselves if we said that as believers, we had no doubts, no questions about our faith. No matter how long we have been a Christian, no matter how strong of a faith we have, no matter how faithfully we lead our devotional life, no matter how fervently we serve others and give witness to the gospel, no matter how well we surround ourselves with good people, at various points in our lives, we all struggle with our own doubts, questions, that rise in our hearts.

There are times in our lives when we seem to have more questions than answers. And, some people tend to have more doubts and ask more questions than others do.

Many people consider doubts and questions as the opposite of faith. But, actually this is not true. The opposite of faith is absolute certainty. On the contrary, doubts and questions often play an important role in our spiritual journey. Wrestling with them can be a sign that you are taking your faith seriously. They can help you get to places of deeper understanding in your faith and lead you to have greater conviction. After all, our ability to think, to reason, to inquire, to investigate, to doubt, and to question are all wonderful gifts God gave us to use.

When we think of Mother Teresa, we remember a woman who embodied what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ. In her mid 30's, she had a great spiritual awakening. It was an overwhelming spiritual ex-

perience through which she discovered God's greater purpose for her life. With clarity and conviction, she soon started her new ministry. And, for the next 50 years she devoted her life to caring for the sick and the poor in India. In 1979, Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize for her humanitarian work, and in 2016, she was canonized as Saint Teresa of Calcutta. She always seemed to have unwavering faith, and her physical appearance exhibited holiness.

But, the truth is, the faith journey of this spiritual giant was not any different from the rest of us. Despite her great ministry and achievements, despite her glowing reputation, deep down inside, she wrestled with doubts and questions. She had extended periods of what Christian writers term "a dark night of the soul." She struggled with a lack of faith. In her spiritual wrestling, sometimes, Mother Teresa even questioned the very existence of God...

In chapter 11 of John's Gospel, we see a story of Thomas that shows him in a different light. Jesus hears about the illness of his friend, Lazarus at Bethany and plans to go visit him. But, when his disciples find out, they try to discourage him from going. They remember the last time Jesus was in that area. He had offended people so much with his teachings that they had tried to stone him to death. But listen to what Thomas says to his fellow disciples who were questioning Jesus' decision: "Let us go also, that we may die with him." (John 11:16) This Thomas is someone who is unwavering in his faith in Jesus and his loyalty to him. Who could have imagined that he would later become known as the doubting disciple?

But, the good news in today's scripture is this: Just as Jesus met the disciples who had gathered behind locked doors in their fear, Jesus met Thomas in his doubt. He appeared to the disciples again when Thomas was finally back in their company. He came for Thomas and gave him what he needed to believe. Just as Jesus did not chastise the other disciples for their fear, but instead, came in peace, he did not chastise Thomas for his doubt.

About the differing experiences among the first witnesses of Easter, the famed professor of preaching Fred Craddock writes in his book, *Preaching Guide*: "The spectrum of faith in the risen Christ is now complete....For some, faith is born and grows as quietly as a child sleeping on a grandmother's lap. For others, faith is a lifetime of wrestling with the angel. Some cannot remember when they did not believe, while others cannot remember anything else, their lives having been shattered and reshaped by the decision of faith. Given these varieties of faith experiences, it is most important to observe that no one of the episodes is made normative for everyone. What John does insist on is that the possibility for faith is not limited to that circle of original disciples nor to their experiences of Christ." (pp. 142-143)

Brothers and sisters, followers of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, wherever you are in your journey of faith, whether it is of the determined devotion of Mary, or the disillusioned doubting of Thomas, know that the risen Lord comes to us and meets us where we are. May we know that God's embrace is wide enough to include all of us, that no fear or doubt is too deep to stand in God's way! So may we wait for the Lord in the truth of where we are! May we draw courage from the witness of the "Doubting," yet honest Thomas! For surely, when the living Christ meets us right where we are, we will proclaim with him, "My Lord and my God!"

Thanks be to God!