

*A Doubt in Time*

**Text:**  
John 20:19-31

**A sermon preached by**  
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## John 20:19-31

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.



With this story the week after Resurrection Sunday, we are invited into a whole new reality. For Thomas and the other disciples, it's actually not just the week after, but it starts with the day of. They are locked up in a room somewhere in or near Jerusalem and in some way Jesus is again with them. "Peace be with you," says

Jesus. And he breathes into their lives the ability to forgive or to hold onto our own and each other's sins. The real point here is that Jesus breathes into not just their lives but into our lives as well this ability –to hold onto or to forgive our own sins and the sins of others.

But, Thomas? Well, “them,” in the story is at first without Thomas the Twin. He's not in the room this first time. He hasn't experienced the power of God's Spirit in this new way yet. He hasn't come to know the new reality just yet.

Thomas has gotten a bad rap down through history. For some reason we've labeled him “The Doubter” all these years yet the word “doubt” never appears in the text. Actually, Thomas might be the one out of all the followers who really did believe what Jesus had been teaching all along. What Jesus has been doing for those past 3 years is inviting people into authentic relationships with himself and, more importantly, with each other. Jesus says to Thomas and to us in this story, “do not be unbelieving but believing,” and the concept of “believing” in the Gospel of John has nothing to do with agreeing to claims and creeds of faith like we tend to understand The Resurrection – as if we absolutely, with full certain, without questions or doubts, believe that Jesus body came back to life and it walked and talked and ate and drank and then floated off into heaven. No, that's not it at all. For John's Gospel, “believing” is a synonym for entering fully into an authentic relationship with Jesus.

But Thomas just isn't sure what to believe by the end of John's Gospel. He's not quite sure if he can now be in a relationship with Jesus. I mean, after all, Jesus is dead. How can that relationship continue when I can no longer touch and see the man I've come to know over these past few years?

Imagine what Thomas and the others had been through. They watched while their friend was illegally arrested and tried. They were probably in the middle of that angry mob that was shouting

“Crucify him! Crucify him!” but what could they have done? They saw Pilate pronounce the death sentence, they saw Jesus bloody and beaten and dead on a cross. They watched as he was taken down and buried in a sealed tomb. They were confronted with having been seen with this Jesus or sounding like a Galilean. Some of the followers headed for the hills or back to their fishing boats or to other safe places like Emmaus. It was over. Three years of Jesus and it was over.

But of all the followers, Thomas is the one who didn't run or hide. He stayed around in Jerusalem. We don't know which of the other disciples were in the room the Sunday night of the resurrection or a week later. The only one we're certain of is Thomas. He's named. He was there. He stayed around because he wanted to know what was going to happen. Still the author of John's Gospel blames him for what we call “doubting.”

Scholars today tell us that John's Gospel includes this negative story about Thomas because the Christianity community that was following John's teaching was “competing” with the community following Thomas' teaching. The Johannine community needed a way to discredit the Thomasine community. So Thomas got painted in a bad light in this Gospel.

Yet Thomas has been a part of two other scenes in this Gospel already. And Thomas shows himself as more “The Questioner” than “The Doubter.”

In Chapter 11, when Jesus tells the disciples that his friend Lazarus has “fallen asleep” and that he will go to “awaken him,” they all say “Well, if he's just asleep he'll be fine so let's just leave him rest in peace.” But not Thomas. Thomas is the one who insists that they go to see what's up. Jesus takes them to Lazarus tomb just to show them again how powerful is the loving relationship between two people who “believe.” Authenticity is the key to believing and Thomas gets it – so he insists they go to experience the depth of the connection between Jesus and Lazarus.

In Chapter 14, when Jesus lets them know that even when he was no longer around he would not be abandoning them – “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” – Thomas is the one who again asks the question. “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.” And the way, says Jesus, is to be in relationship with God – and by being in relationship with me, he says, you are with God. “Show us the way,” asks Thomas. “This is the way,” answers Jesus. “Love one another.”

Thomas doesn't doubt. He just questions. In all three appearances in John's Gospel, Thomas is The Questioner. Not “The Doubter,” but “The Questioner.” And isn't that okay?

I'm sure that week following Jesus death, Thomas was filled with questions. And then this night a week later, out comes the questions again. He doesn't doubt that Jesus *could* have been resurrected, he simply doubted the others' story about last week's appearance. He wanted to see it with his own eyes, he wanted his questions answered. Thomas the Pragmatist rather than Thomas the Doubter.

It seems to me to be no different from the other disciples just a few verses and a week earlier. Jesus came to the locked room and stood among them and “he showed them his hands and his side.” “*Then . . .*,” note that word, “*Then . . .* the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” No different is it? Not until they saw his hands and side did they rejoice. Thomas only wanted the same opportunity since he had missed the first appearance. He just wanted to see and touch for himself. Once he saw, he was clearly on board. “My Lord and my God!, ” said Thomas. There is, arguably, no stronger statement anywhere in all of the Jesus stories.

Thomas is willing to speak up for what he needs in order to believe. We each have needs to be able to deepen our relationships, yet mostly we're just too uncomfortable or afraid or stubborn or proud to ask. Mostly it's just easier to accept how things are than to ask the questions. It's easier to grasp for the simple allegiance to and acceptance of doctrine and dogma and a concrete faith that really means nothing than it is to ask the difficult questions like Thomas. I argue that's why many conservative and evangelical churches seem to grow so easily today – because they offer a rote, easily graspable faith statement to sign onto rather than allowing the asking of deep and difficult questions.

One writer put it this way:

We're reluctant to speak up when it comes to belief. We don't speak up for the things we need, the things owed us, 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. For others. In shame. In guilt. Someone else will say something, right? Surely someone else will speak up. Someone else will stand up for injustice, for discrimination, for false claims about religious freedom. For those abused. For those who have no voice. Someone else will give voice to what I feel and know and want. Someone else will speak up for me.

We have to see to believe. We can't blame Thomas for that, it just seems to be natural for us.

We have to touch, see, hear, smell, and taste before we believe or disbelieve. We have questions – even if we don't always voice those questions – before we go deep into a relationship with anyone let alone with Jesus. Thomas was the courageous one – he

asked. Rather than simply saying I'm full in without any questions, he's the one who asks. What, how, who, when, where?

But it's this believing thing that seems to be the point of the whole Thomas story. It's not what you doubt but what you believe. Jesus responds to Thomas, and to us the reader, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This is the climax of the story in John's Gospel. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's me. And it's you. Can you believe the resurrection stories without having seen the resurrected Jesus? Or better yet, can you be in relationship with Jesus without fully understanding the details of the great mystery that is The Resurrection?

If something happens that is entirely different from anything you might ever have experienced, can you be open enough to allow it to change your life? Or more specifically, "Can you be in a life-changing relationship with Jesus after his death without having to understand every detail of it?"

Here's the crux of what's going on. Jesus spent his entire ministry trying to get us to understand that life in its very basic form is quite simply about connecting and loving one another. Period. It is what God desires of us. Anything else really makes no difference because when you love one another, justice and mercy and compassion and peace all follow quite naturally.

Last weekend's radio broadcast of Krista Tippett's *On Being*, included time with Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest and founder/executive director of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. We will only come to truly believe, he says, when we can embrace even those we consider the least among us.

And I'll leave us with this this morning:



*[La] compañía de Jesús* is kind of what St. Ignatius called the thing. So it's about being in companionship with Jesus. St. Ignatius, in his spiritual exercises, has a meditation called "The Two Standards." And in it, he says very simply, "See Jesus standing in the lowly place."

It's not about saluting a set of beliefs ... it's about walking with Jesus and being a companion. And I haven't found anything that's brought me more life or joy than standing with Jesus, but also with the particularity of standing in the lowly place, with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. And I find the fullness of life in trying to, as best I can in my own way, to stand there.

Amen.