

Easter 2C
John 20:19-23

Struggling with Doubt

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I was talking with some clergy friends this past week about the Gospel reading for today. I noted that it was “time for Thomas” and wondered about the relentless focus the reading appointed for today has on the figure of “Doubting Thomas.” You might say, I have a thing for Thomas. I do not like that his fame seems to rest in the front of our minds on the fact that he did not, could not believe the fantastical story his dearest friends told him. “While you were out Thomas, the most amazing thing happened...” The other disciples told Thomas that as they hid in the locked room, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

While Thomas was out of the room the most amazing thing happened and he had missed it. Did Thomas worry about his own betrayal of Jesus? Perhaps he wondered if he had done something unforgiveable during the days of the passion as they all ran and hid – his deepest fear being he might be counted like Judas Iscariot and Jesus appeared *on purpose* while he was out. Jesus had anointed the others with the Holy Spirit and gave them sacramental authority. Thomas had been left out. It must have broken his heart and stung his pride. I imagine it was his disappointment that fueled his response that branded him forever as “Doubting Thomas.” So you have seen the Lord, have you? Well, “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.” He was made to wait a week. St. John’s account tells us that it was a *full week* later until Jesus finally came and stood among them again. What agony that must have been for Thomas. He must have felt like he was left alone in the dark, watching his friends live in the light of their Holy-Spirit-filled selves. Thomas must have doubted himself in that long week, agonizing over why he had been left out. Jesus knew the whole of the story because before anything could be said after he arrived among them the second time and bid them peace, Jesus turned to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” But isn’t that what we all want to do? Isn’t that the kind of clarity and tangible encounter with the risen Christ that we all need in order to believe?

If I said to you, “We missed you last Sunday. Jesus came and stood among us and then gave us a special holy anointing and a special sacramental commission. Too bad you were away...” You would be understandably upset. You might think we’d all lost our minds. You might think there was another explanation for what we saw (what’s in that wine, anyway?) You might think we were pulling your leg or even lying. There are other possibilities, but all of them include that you would feel like an outsider – that we had evolved into something new and that you were not a part of it. You might doubt that we ever really loved you or cared for you if at the first opportunity you weren’t present, we changed the game. Grace Church wouldn’t feel like your place anymore. Doubt is a hard emotion to carry without it impacting every aspect of your emotional life. A few years ago it came to light that Mother Theresa left a cache of nearly 6,000 letters of correspondence between herself and other clergy and spiritual directors. A collection of excerpts was published as a book in 2007 under the title, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. The letters revealed that a deeply faithful woman who went to serve among the poorest of the poor in India soon struggled with doubt about faith and God. ““In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss,” she wrote in 1959, “of God not wanting me — of God not being God — of God not existing.” According to the book, this inner turmoil, known by only a handful of her closest colleagues, lasted until her death in 1997.”¹ Her struggle with doubt is similar to what many of the great saints of the faith have experienced. St. Theresa of Avila struggled with doubt. “St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic, labeled it the “dark night,” the time when a person feels completely abandoned by God, and which can lead even ardent believers to doubt God’s existence. During her final illness, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the 19th-century French Carmelite nun who is now widely revered as “The Little Flower,” faced a similar trial, which seemed to center

on doubts about whether anything awaited her after death. “If you only knew what darkness I am plunged into,” she said to the sisters in her convent.”ⁱⁱⁱ These are some of the great saints of Christian history, whose examples have informed the deep faith of countless people. How can this be? Darkness, abandonment, feeling left out. Doubt: It’s not just for the saints and apostles anymore.

What turned things around for Thomas? Thomas had a profound encounter with the risen Christ. It was so powerful that St. John wrote, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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 (vv.30-31.)” In other words, Thomas’ experience of the resurrected Jesus was all St. John felt we needed in order for us to believe the reports. When I was in Canterbury England for the Lambeth conference in 2008, when all of the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered to meet for two weeks, I saw a group of Southeast Asian bishops, the delegation from Kerala. They were wearing distinct black and red vestments. I asked about them and was told they were Anglicans out of the tradition of the St. Thomas Churches in India, whose roots go back to the earliest days of Christianity. I learned that Thomas ended up being the apostle who was so ardent in his faith that he traveled the furthest of all the disciples to spread the good news. The Christian community he founded in India still carries his certainty, still shines the light of Thomas to this day. Thomas was not a doubter – his faith was unshakeable and rooted in his encounter with Christ in that locked room. As he took in Jesus finally standing before him and looked upon the wounds that bore testimony to his suffering and death, Thomas cried out, ‘My Lord and my God!’ His week spent in the darkness of doubt about his friends, about himself, and about Jesus made his encounter with the risen Christ all the more brilliant a light in his life. Thomas took that light to the farthest reaches of the world. Doubt in the midst of a journey of faith can feel like entering the darkness. But it seems to me that doubt may not be a curse, but rather a gift, an opportunity: we need to be willing to be there and willing to allow Christ to enter it with us. It may be that the darkness of doubt allows the light to shine more brightly when we encounter Christ.

“In time, with the aid of the priest who acted as her spiritual director, Mother Teresa concluded that [her] painful experiences [of doubt] could help her identify not only with the abandonment that Jesus Christ felt during the crucifixion, but also with the abandonment that the poor faced daily. In this way she hoped to enter, in her words, the “dark holes” of the lives of the people with whom she worked.”ⁱⁱⁱ She encountered Christ in a way that was deeply personal and real. Her struggle with doubt did not break the will of her call, her determination to be the hands and feet of Christ as she tended to the poorest of the poor. In her ministry, Mother Teresa was the light of Christ healing and loving the broken and forgotten. In her sympathy with the darkness, she shined the light of the unconditional love of Christ more brilliantly than is possible for most. I have come to believe there is a certain beauty and vulnerability in doubt. Doubt cuts us deeply but that very vulnerability opens us up to the risen Christ when he is among us. St. John wrote his gospel witness of the encounter Thomas had – and it was Thomas, the one who went on to spread the Gospel so far, his certainty and complete joy catching hearts on fire for this risen Christ who had stood before him with his wounds and invited Thomas to touch and believe... The flipside of doubt is the unshakeable conviction of our faith, like Thomas’ faith, once we have encountered the risen Christ. My prayer for each of us is that we remember Thomas’ struggle with doubt when we are in the midst of our own dark times. His story of his encounter with the risen Christ can give us the courage to keep inviting Christ to come into the midst of our doubt, to keep asking him the hard questions about life, death, and suffering. Struggling in doubt, we remain in conversation with Christ and we deepen our relationship with him. In the midst of our darkness we look for the bright light’s appearing in our lives in the many ways Christ manifests his presence: as prayers answered, as healing, as love, and as mercy. Amen.

ⁱ James Martin, “A Saint’s Dark Night,” *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 2007.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*