

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Second Sunday in Easter – April 8, 2018
John 20:19-31

Poor Thomas...it's really not fair, is it? To have your life's work and mission, even your very identity, summed up with just one word... from just one occasion... that's not right. I think it is time to let go of "Doubting" Thomas and all that implies.

Upon several occasions in the Gospel of John, we meet the disciple of Jesus whom John calls, "the Twin" but whom we probably recognize best as "Doubting Thomas". All because of one misunderstanding over two thousand years ago, what we remember most that he was the one who doubted Jesus' resurrection. This nickname has stuck even though the evangelist John never even uses the word "doubt" or "doubting" in his description of Thomas. It has stuck even though earlier in the gospel account, Thomas demonstrated remarkable fidelity to Jesus and exhorted his fellow disciples to faithful courage.

But Nicknames can be like that, can't they? Something happens and you will forever be labelled with that. Often, the event that happened is misunderstood and now you carry a nickname that doesn't even make sense to you or seems totally inappropriate or unfair. Nicknames have a tendency to take on a life of their own.

One of my family's favorite TV series was the "The Office." For those who may be unfamiliar with this show, it is a mockumentary-style comedy about the staff at the Scranton branch of a fictional mid-sized paper-supply company. In this series, one of the main characters is Jim Halpert, a young salesman and office prankster who we watch grow up over the seasons. In the third season, Jim is transferred to another branch of the company for a time and there he meets Andy Bernard, who starts calling Jim "Tuna" because on his first day there he brought a tuna fish sandwich for lunch. And for the next *six seasons*, Jim would be called "Tuna" or "Big Tuna" even though he doesn't really like tuna fish, nor does he ever eat it again. *One time*, one sandwich that *he didn't even really like*, and the nickname "Tuna" stuck.

On another show I've watched fairly recently is "How to Get Away with Murder," about a practicing lawyer with flexible morals who teaches criminal law. One of her students, Wes, is pegged with the nickname, "Waitlist" because in the very first episode of the series, we and his fellow classmates learn that he had been accepted to the school just a few days before classes started– he had been admitted from the waitlist. No matter all the other unbelievable things that happen to this group, they continue to call him "Waitlist," constantly reminding him, and the audience, that Wes didn't get accepted to the law school straight-out but was instead seen a second-class student.

What is funny about these nicknames, is that once you hear them enough times, you don't even really notice that it is the nickname being used rather than their real name, for it just becomes yet another name for the person –another mark of identity. And yet, every time you hear this nickname, you are subtly reminded of the event or attribute to which the name points and a connection is reinforced in our minds. Jim must *love* tuna sandwiches. Wes can't be that smart, he only got in from the waitlist. Thomas is the one who is doubtful of Jesus' resurrection; he's the one who needs proof because he doesn't have faith.

Well, I think "Doubting Thomas" is an unfair and inappropriate nickname for identifying this important apostle. We need to forget this nickname because Thomas' primary attribute is not

doubt at all. He is not the slightly inferior disciple. And Jesus does not rebuke him because of his lack of faith.

As I mentioned earlier, nowhere in John's Gospel is he described as "the doubter". Rather, he is called "the Twin." We are first introduced to him when, following the news of Lazarus' death, Jesus declares his intention to return to Judea. The other disciples try to dissuade him because they know it will lead to his death, but it is Thomas who urges the others to follow Jesus, saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (11:16) Thomas may not be so much a doubter as a realist. And even when he knew what this might cost, he encourages his fellow disciples to be courageous.

Thomas was also one who was willing to ask difficult questions. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus explained to the disciples that he was going away to prepare a heavenly home for his followers, and that one day they would join him there. Thomas reacted by saying, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (14:5) With the benefit of over 2000 years of hindsight, we tend to hear Thomas' question and think, "oh, those foolish and doubting disciples...they just can't get it! How can they not understand that the Messiah, the anointed one of God, will be killed, become the first fruits of the resurrection, ascend to heaven, and then return at the end of days? It's so obvious!"

But I think it takes courage to step up and ask the questions that probably everyone else is also wondering but is afraid to ask, lest they be judged as stupid or faithless. Somehow over these many years, we've gotten the notion that "faith" means that you don't question – you don't explore or challenge. We seem to assume that the more "faith" we have, the fewer questions we'll ask. But as one scholar wrote: "the Bible offers a different picture of faith, one in which faith and doubt are woven much closer together than we might imagine. Faith, after all, isn't knowledge but instead 'is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'" (Hebrews 11:1)¹

In our lesson today, I think that Thomas was not "doubting" Jesus' resurrection so much as *yearning* for *his own experience* of the risen Lord. What he's really asking for is what all the other disciples had already experienced. When Jesus appeared to the other disciples, he showed them his hands and his side and only then, John records, did the disciples rejoice "because they saw the Lord" (20:20). If anything, Thomas is no better or worse than the other disciples who also didn't believe the crazy accounts of the empty tomb, the visitation by angels, and Mary's story of her encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Indeed, John makes clear in his Gospel that the other disciples didn't believe that he had been raised from the dead until they *personally experienced* the risen Lord. Angels, empty tombs, and testimony were not enough –it was the *encounter* with the resurrected Christ that brought them to something beyond belief –the *experience* of the risen Lord brought them to *faith*.

I think poor Thomas more than proved his disciple-worthiness. Once Thomas did encounter the resurrected Jesus, he immediately makes the chief confession of Jesus in John's gospel. Thomas proclaims Jesus not only as "my Lord" – the title reserved for Caesar in the first century – but also "my God", the highest praise of Jesus made in the New Testament and an echo of the opening line of John's Gospel.² Instead of being a model of doubt and fickle faithlessness, I see Thomas as a model of discipleship – or more accurately of how one *becomes* a disciple. That discipleship requires an encounter with Jesus – an experience of God present and alive in our lives.

¹ Lose, Robert; <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1548>

² Ibid.

For each one of us our individual journey of faith is grounded in our own, personal encounter with God. We may or may not “believe” in certain doctrines of the church – in fact, our “belief” often changes significantly through the various seasons of our lives– but it is the experience of Christ in and through our lives that builds a faith that is worthy and durable to withstand the joys and sorrows of our fragile, mortal lives. It is *this* faith that will sustain us when all else falls away. It is this faith that is the bedrock upon which we build the structure of our spiritual lives. To build it instead on beliefs in this or about that, is as risky as building our house on sand.

So we, like Thomas, should keep asking questions, keep seeking our own encounters with the risen Lord. Because while our scripture accounts differ on the details just what happened at that empty tomb on that Easter morning, they all agree that, as Frederick Buechner writes, “what convinced the people that [Jesus has] risen from the dead was not the absence of his corpse but his living presence. And it has been so ever since.”³

Amen.

³ Buechner, Frederick; <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/4/19/his-living-presence>