

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
John 20:19-30 (Thomas' Confession)

Out of the terrible agony of Thomas' defection and doubt came faith's sweetest song: "My Lord and my God." Yet Thomas is remembered not as a person of faith, but as 'the doubter.' The sting of his bitter words – "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" – remained etched in the memory of many. But that painful moment in Thomas' spiritual pilgrimage was not his stopping point. When at last he discovered for **himself** that Jesus was alive, his faith was stronger than the doubt that had preceded it.

While Thomas is the disciple remembered as "the doubter," he was hardly alone in that. All the disciples experienced the horror of soul-numbing, faith-crushing doubt. The death of Jesus put a huge question mark in front of everything they believed. Luke tells us that **all** of the disciples dismissed the women's report of the resurrection as "an idle tale." As far as they could see, Jesus' death meant the end. So Thomas was hardly the only doubter in the crowd. His only crime was being absent that first Easter eve when Jesus appeared to his disciples. Consequently, Thomas missed having his faith reignited by that first encounter with the risen Jesus.

As to why Thomas was absent, we can only guess. From what little we see of Thomas in John's Gospel, he appears to be a rugged individualist. So when his world came crashing down, he was the type who had to find his way alone.

Previously, when Jesus told his disciples that he was going away to prepare a place for them, he added the aside, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." The others nodded like they knew what Jesus was talking about. Thomas alone popped off with frank admission, "Lord, the truth is, we don't have a clue where you're going. So how can we know the way?" Only then did Jesus deliver the gem for which we have Thomas to thank, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

On another occasion, Jesus decided to return to the vicinity of Jerusalem in the wake of Lazarus' death. Knowing Jesus' enemies had a price on his head, the disciples feared such a move courted confrontation and even death. But Thomas cheered the frightened band with his brave pronouncement, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

In John's Gospel, Thomas emerges as a man of conviction and courage. He was prepared to die with Jesus; he just couldn't bear the prospect of living without him. So as his fellow disciples huddled in the upper room, cowering behind locked doors. Thomas, never a company man, chose to go it alone. He was probably out wandering the hillsides, wracking his brain and searching his heart, when Jesus first appeared to the disciples.

There is a certain nobility about Thomas' defiance. He simply wasn't one to go along for the ride, so when he was greeted by ecstatic disciples crying, "We have seen the Lord! We have seen the Lord!" - that wasn't good enough for him. Thomas wasn't about to buy the party line just because others said it was so, for he knew that a faith not forged in the fire of personal experience was no faith at all.

A little hard-nosed skepticism like Thomas' can be an invaluable asset in the life of faith. It keeps one from being victimized by charlatans and con artists. Cults thrive on the "blind faith:" of their

adherents. But a faith that is “blind” isn’t faith at all.

Faith, especially in John’s Gospel, is the capacity to “see” God’s truth in Jesus. And sometimes doubt is the darkness that precedes faith’s dawning.

By contrast, the infamous Heaven’s Gate cult demanded a suspension of all doubt. In that chilling video of the cultists cheerfully contemplating suicide, they all appeared in pairs. Why? Because each cult member was given a “check partner” to guard against independent thought. Should someone prove stubborn enough to think for themselves, despite such controls, that person was sent to a special “decontamination zone” for a booster shot of brainwashing. Contact with family members or anyone else who questioned the group’s spin on reality was absolutely forbidden.

Among Christians, doubt is regarded with suspicion. Those who dare to question the Bible or popular Christian beliefs are viewed as desecrating the faith. But as the Heaven’s Gate tragedy demonstrates, parroting another’s creed is not faith. It is conformity at best, if not outright delusion. Only those like Thomas, who refuse to buy spiritual peace at the cost of intellectual integrity, will discover the truth that sets them free. Henry Drummond, the well-known preacher once wrote, “Better a little faith, dearly won, better launched alone on the infinite bewilderment of truth, than perish on the splendid plenty of the richest creeds.”

Some degree of doubting is essential if we are to take whatever faith we inherited from others and make it our own. Does that faith reflect our own understanding of Scripture and experience of God? Do we need a faith that better fits the unique contours of our life? This is something the defenders of orthodoxy always forget: a living faith doesn’t come straight off the rack, it must be personally tailored.

So, Thomas should not be condemned for his doubts, not if they were honest protests of a broken heart. That is something we need to learn from his story. Though he wore the scarlet “D” on his forehead, he still had a place among the community of believers. No one said to him, “Thomas, we’re tired of your raining on our parade. We’re tired of your probing questions and critical spirit. Why don’t you take your doubts and go somewhere else?” Instead, when the other disciples told him they had seen Jesus in his absence, they invited Thomas to bring his doubts with him and take his place at the table. So the next time Jesus appeared, Thomas was there.

The worst thing to do when struggling with doubt is to cut oneself off from the community of faith. Had Thomas persisted in such a go-it-alone spirituality, his doubts may well have hardened into cynicism. But because he kept his doubts in creative tension with the witness of the Church, they were just a rest stop station in his journey of faith and not a final destination.

Unfortunately, when doubt strikes, most people cut themselves off from their faith community at the very time they need it most. This is often seen in the young university student whose childhood faith undergoes rigorous testing. During this time, their Christian convictions are being challenged by new teachings and lifestyles. The typical university student is usually inactive in a local congregation. As a result, the student will develop intellectually while their spiritual growth is on hold. Consequently, many young people graduate from university with their childhood faith in ruins, with nothing better built in its place.

In the wake of a setback, tragedy, or bereavement, when doubts are circling a wounded faith like vultures, many people find it difficult to remain active in church. The church reminds them of assurances that proved shallow or prayers that weren’t answered, at least as one had hoped.

Yet, to drop out of church at such a time is to rob oneself of the very resource needed to keep doubt and despair from overwhelming the soul.

Thomas had learned that lesson. Despite his seeking solitude to confront the depth of his pain, he recognized his need for the fellowship of believers. So, he was present the following Sunday evening when the disciples once again gathered in the Upper Room. And no one showed him the door because he wasn't at that moment a card-carrying member of the faithful. He was welcome, despite his doubts. Hopefully today's doubters can find a warm welcome in our churches.

So, a doubting Thomas was present when the risen Christ appeared the second time. Jesus greeted his disciples as before: "Peace be with you." Then using this encore appearance to address Thomas, he turned to him: "Thomas," said Jesus, radiant and full of life, "Draw near and put your finger in my nail prints, and your hand in my side. It's time to put your doubts aside and believe."

Such encouragement in the struggle to believe is a sign of Christ's presence. He gives us what we need to commit ourselves to him: fellow pilgrims whose vibrant faith raises the possibility of our own; the hint of an unseen presence weaving amid surprising circumstances we just can't quite ascribe to chance; a passage from Scripture that speaks with pointed relevance to our most pressing need. Always, Jesus is testing us as he tested Thomas to move through our doubts in the direction of faith. While the territory of doubt is a good place to visit, it is a terrible place to live.

As many who stayed mired too long in their doubts can attest, doubts left untended soon harden into the concrete of cynicism and despair. That's why it is so important that we bring our doubts to church, where they can be tested and challenged. As Jesus said to Thomas, so he says to us today, "Don't let your doubts land you in that hellish place where there is no faith at all. Instead, in light of my risen presence, now made known to you, take the risk and believe."

Thomas stood there with a quivering jaw and a broken heart. Seeing Jesus before him, he felt no need to touch the wounds. Instead, the mere sight of the risen Christ quickened his faltering faith and drove him to his knees. Overcome with wonder and awe, he cried, "My Lord and my God."

Jesus then asked, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" The answer for Thomas was the same as for all the rest of the disciples: yes, he believed in the risen Jesus because he saw him and glimpsed within time a hint of his eternal glory. That was, exactly what it took to ignite the faith of those first disciples and to birth the Church.

We belong to a different place and time. We have neither seen the Jesus of history nor feasted our eyes upon the glory of the risen Christ. And so the words Jesus spoke to Thomas are also meant for us: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Both faith and fear demand you believe in something you cannot see. You choose.

Robed in those words, the living Christ comes seeking us as he came to those first disciples who were crippled by fear and doubt. He offers us the same life-giving promise: "Peace be with you." Though we cannot see Jesus as they did, he is no less real, for as he breathes his Spirit upon us, we experience the gentle calm of his peace.

And in the warmth of his presence, the icy grip of doubt begins to melt.

Although not visible to the naked eye, the living Christ is always present. And every time we venture out in faith and entrust ourselves to him, we discover his power to bear us up and bear us through.

When we call his name, there is an answering presence, and our souls grow strong in the confidence that we do not traverse this mortal plane alone, for underneath we are met by the everlasting arms. Or as 1 Peter expresses it, "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him, and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy."

We can thank Thomas for the gracious words "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." And we can thank him for much more. Were it not for him, we might believe those who tell us doubt is the mortal enemy of faith. Because of Thomas, we know better. We know that doubt can be the midwife of a new and more vital communion with God.

Maybe Tennyson was right when he wrote: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." For from the depths of Thomas' doubt sprang the highest confession in John's Gospel: "My Lord and my God!" In the end he was no longer Doubting Thomas, but a **strongly believing Thomas**.

"Peace be with you." That is God's gift to us this morning, words which briefly, yet eloquently capture and express the hope of Easter: God is alive; God is with us; we are blessed with this incredible, all-inclusive word of grace that radiates an atmosphere of Easter upon all our days, weeks, and years. The message is spoken by the one who shares with us the Word of the Lord, a word of love and blessing, "Peace be with you." Amen.