

Sermon: Faithful Thomas**Scripture: John 20:19-29****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: April 11, 2021**

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews,^[a] Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. ²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin,^[b] was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." ²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

The disciple Thomas gets a bad rap in Christian history, the only disciple who has a qualifier placed before his name that just won't let up and there's nothing biblical about it at all. There's nowhere in the Gospels where he is actually called Doubting Thomas. We don't call Peter "Denying Peter" even though he denied Jesus not once but 3 times. And we don't call Matthew the tax-collector-disciple "Greedy Matthew" even though tax collectors were notorious for lining their pockets with others' money. James and John, though they asked to sit at Jesus' right hand in paradise and were chastised by Jesus for it, aren't called Self-Absorbed James or Narcissistic John. Even Judas is forever just called Judas, not "Betraying Judas". But Thomas, good ole faithful Thomas is down through the ages labeled the Doubter. I wonder if Thomas takes issue with it "Really?! That's how I'm forever known as Doubting Thomas? You know Jesus, I was hardly the only one of your followers who doubted... but of course I get stuck

with the name!” And he’d be correct in his protest. As you read through the Gospels you realize that probably the most common of all responses to Jesus’ resurrection was doubt.

In Luke’s account, when the women ran and told the 11 disciples about the empty tomb, it says “the 11 heard it as an idle tale and doubted them.” And then on the road to Emmaus, two guys walking along dejected by all that had happened when Jesus himself accompanies them and they have no idea who he even is. At one point Jesus shakes his head and says “you foolish ones, so slow of heart to believe.” In Mark’s Gospel, the women at first are terrified and say nothing to anyone but when Mary Magdalene finally gets up the courage to tell the male disciples and it says in verse 11 “But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by Mary, they would not believe it...” and then afterward as he appeared to the eleven “Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart.” Matthew ends his whole Gospel with what is known as the Great Commission but the Great Commission begins with these words – “Now the 11 disciples went to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them and when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted.” You hear that? Some of the 11 disciples who saw and heard the resurrected Jesus himself, doubted what they saw with their own eyes. So I’m just saying Thomas was not alone and he would be justified if he was a little hurt by his forever moniker “Doubting Thomas”.

Or... I don’t know, maybe he’s proud of it. Maybe he’s proud to be something of a patron saint forever more of all people who are skeptics and all those who wonder and doubt. Maybe Thomas loves the fact that through his story, above all others, there has been permission granted for people to question and doubt and struggle honestly with what they believe about Christianity, about

the resurrected Jesus, about God, about faith. In fact Thomas might argue that doubt in the face of such immense mystery is a better response than having it all buttoned up in a nice little answer package!

Like that bumper sticker that says “The bible says it. I believe it. That does it.”? Wow. How uninteresting! That absolutism and certitude just makes me want to drive off the road. I’d be more interested in a bumper sticker that said: “The Bible says it. And I believe it (I think, but we gotta be clear about what we mean by “it” and “believe” and recognize how we often interpret the Bible to suit our own purposes and to claim that we are right and others wrong, and we should doubt at times at least own interpretation of who God is and what God wants). THAT does it.” But that could be dangerous to try and read on someone’s bumper, I’ll admit. But what I’m saying is that doubt can very well be an appropriate response to so great a mystery as the resurrection of Jesus. The writer Frederick Buechner says that doubt is not the opposite of faith, rather he says “doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving!” But first he says – “whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*).

Thomas was awake and moving in his doubting. And Jesus didn’t shame and deny his bold request for proof when he said “I will not believe unless I see the wounds in his hands and feet”. Jesus did not say to him, like he said to the other disciples, “why are you so slow to believe?” He said to Doubting Thomas “here you go Thomas don’t only look but touch my wounds and know that it is me.” I wonder if Thomas had said “of course I believe Jesus was resurrected, period. He

said he would be. I believe it. That does it.” If he would have actually encountered the risen Christ. And on the other hand, if he had said “eh, that’s outrageous. It runs counter to everything I know. I don’t believe it. That does it.” If he also would have lost his chance. But Thomas shows us a third way. Good ole Faithful Thomas sits in the struggle of it and says “this doesn’t make any sense to me, I’m not sure I can believe unless there’s some evidence, so devastated am I by the crucifixion and death of my friend and Lord” and for 8 days he sits in that uncomfortable tension and torque, in the midst of those ants in his pants, and because of his faithfulness in even his doubting eventually he comes to discover Jesus as real as ever.

Just as we spoke a few weeks ago about Lamentation and how God can handle our anger and our complaining – “why o why God have you turned your face from me. Why are you so silent!” – Just so, God can handle our doubts too. God does not smite the doubters and the haters or ignore them because they don’t have enough faith, what a small god that would be. Instead, I believe, and I believe the Gospels show, that God seeks the doubters and the haters out and like was the case with Doubting Thomas, if God finds even the least bit of openness within someone and the smallest of openings there, then God will enter in and be revealed.

So wonder away.

Doubt away!

Be honest with your questions and your disquiet in what our faith teaches.

Honor how perplexing it all is and how you can vacillate in belief.

It’s ok to indulge in skepticism and doubt when it comes to Jesus

and his Resurrection and what that means for your life and to wonder about whether God's actually there or not.

But with Thomas as your example, don't stop there. Be an active doubter. Seek out answers. Actually, demand answers. Look for evidence. Talk to other believers and other skeptics and all the people in between. AND don't be surprised when through that honest search somehow, in someway, at some point the risen Christ, the living God, the Great and Holy Spirit finally discovers the entry point into your heart and reveals Themselves to you... Through a conversation or a song or an answer to a prayer you forgot you had prayed, or a sudden turn of fortune, or a deeper insight, or a way made clear, or a new path where you thought there was only a dead end... however it might come, let God know your open, in Jesus' blessed name, amen!