

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, April 19, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

TOMMY, TOMMY, TOMMY!!

Scripture Readings

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 Psalm 16 I Peter 1:3-9 John 20:19-31

=====

Poor Thomas. He's been called the doubter, the skeptic.

Jesus seems to chastise him for having to see in order to believe.

But I don't think he's all that bad. In fact, my heart goes out to the guy.

He missed the first visit from Jesus.

But he wanted to know what had happened, and he was there for the second appearance.

Thomas has been called the patron saint of doubters, but a colleague has suggested that actually: *he's the patron saint of the chronically late.*

If you've ever been a day late and dollar short, Thomas is your man.

Thomas just seems to have bad timing, that's all.

Not just because of what happens in the story, but because of when this story gets told—the week after Easter.

Think about who comes to church on Easter:

- the regulars, yes, but also some visitors;
- some people who are only there begrudgingly, because their spouses wanted them to come;
- people who long ago stopped believing in the whole Jesus thing but can't quite break the Christmas and Easter habit.

And it's a shame, really, because this is the text they need to hear.

A text about **doubt**, and how Jesus handles a skeptic in the ranks.

Maybe we need to start preaching this text on Easter, instead of "low" Sunday, when we're often preaching to the choir.

But if we're honest, we know that even the "choir," even the most steadfast churchgoers, have doubts.

I don't think it's possible to have a mature faith without some doubt.

It's just hard for us to admit it.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana

I have a friend who one year on Easter told her congregation, “OK, next week’s sermon is on *doubt and the Christian faith*,” and invited people to write down their doubts, anonymously, put them in the offering plate, and said they’d address them next week.

The pews were packed that day, but she received... *four responses*. Four people felt comfortable admitting their doubts.

=====

I think we don’t admit doubt because we’re afraid of being judged: *Everyone else’s faith seems so solid. Maybe there’s something wrong with me because I have doubts.*

We’re afraid that by admitting to doubts, we expose our weak places to the naysayers, who are only too happy to gleefully jump in, arms folded and smug expressions—see, *I always knew this Christianity thing was ridiculous.*

But here’s the thing: Jesus is so matter-of-fact towards Thomas.

In fact, Thomas doesn’t even have to ask Jesus directly for proof.

Jesus walks right in, bids them peace, and says, “*Here Thomas. Put your hand here and touch there.*”

It’s as if Thomas’s doubt is the most natural thing in the world.

In fact, the word for faith and the word for doubt come from the same Greek root.

It’s as if they’re two sides of the same coin. It’s as if... you can’t have one without the other.

I had a professor at Trent – Dr. Marion Fry – who went on a little mini-rant one night in philosophy class.

We were discussing faith, and the question of doubt came up.

Dr. Fry launched into a brief monologue that amounted to: *If you have faith, of course you have doubt. How can you have faith without doubt?*

She was right. If your faith doesn’t have any doubt mixed in with it, it’s not faith, it’s certainty.

And it’s hazardous to be certain of yourself when it comes to the God of the universe—you’re just asking for trouble.

Frederick Buechner said, “*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.*”

Consider these words written in a letter years ago: *Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.*

There is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake?

Hear the doubt? But do you also hear the wrestling? Here is someone who's not giving up, but is continuing to struggle, listen, yearn for God, even in the midst of the doubt. *That's Mother Teresa.*

The book *Come Be My Light* contains decades of her letters and journals, revealing a woman who inspired millions by her compassion and mercy but who was gripped with long periods of doubt and torment over God's absence.

Now, if Mother Teresa can feel these things, who is immune from them?

As Jesus says later in the text, *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

I'd like to add, it's healthy to *doubt your faith* too—if you know something for sure, you might want to loosen your grip, just a little, so you can still be surprised.

God's not finished with you.

But also *have faith in your doubt*: have faith that in asking the questions, you will find what you need.

The questions may not lead you to greater certainty, but they might lead you to even better, more life-giving questions.

Lots of things – in fact, most things – are questioned these days. Do or say or think anything – and someone will question it.

Thomas, is big on questions, daring to ask the questions no one else asks.

Consider **John 14**, when Jesus says:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled... In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?' And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to... And you know the way to the place where I am going.'**

That's beautiful, isn't it? I could listen to that all day.

But then... *Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'*

Thomas kinda spoils the mood, doesn't he?

But you know what? I needed Thomas to ask that question, because listen to what Jesus says next.

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

Imagine if Thomas had never asked that question.

We might never have received one of the most elegant statements about Jesus and our identity in Christ.

- I am the way: If you want to know which way to go, look to me.
- I am the truth: If you want to know what grounds your being, look to me.
- I am the life: If you're tired of going the way of darkness and death, look to me.

It's an answer, but not a simple one.

It probably led to more questions. And so be it.

In her book *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about people who would come to her because they had trouble believing. Some believed “less than they thought they should about Jesus. They were not troubled by the idea that he may have had two human parents instead of one, or that his real presence with his disciples after his death might have been more metaphysical than physical... For others, the issue was that they believed more than Jesus. Having beheld his glory, they found themselves running into God’s glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said it should not be.”

In the midst of these conversations, and her own questions, Taylor said, “I realized just how little interest I had in defending Christian beliefs. The parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the Church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts. ‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. Behold the Lamb of God. Behold, I stand at the door and knock...’ Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief.”

Thomas is a beholder, more than he is a believer, I think.

He is moved to make a declaration of faith, but I’m not sure he’s ready to stand up and recite the Apostles’ Creed.

He knows that something has happened, but “*My Lord and My God*” are about as specific as he can be in terms of a statement of faith.

But what is it that Thomas beholds?

What does he look at? Jesus’ eyes, piercing and deep? His face, open and available? The way he walks into the room, gently but with authority?

These are what we’d normally look at to recognize a person.

But no, Thomas looks at Jesus’ wounds. The nail holes, the pierced side. Those epicenters of pain.

If like Thomas you’re feeling doubt about whether the resurrection is true, whether life really wins out over death... or if like Mother Teresa you doubt whether God really loves you... then it’s time to look into the wounded places in the world.

We need to be in touch with people who are wounded, people who are down and out, people who are poor, people the world has forgotten... Because that’s where Jesus said he’d be.

I have had several close friends who have suffered from degenerative diseases like ALS, MS, various forms of dementia. Being with those people – talking, visiting, laughing, praying together, listening to their words – was a spiritual experience. Those were moments when I felt God’s presence.

Unless we’re willing to enter into the brokenness of others

- unless we’re willing to love the world that God loves, in all its difficulty and suffering
- all of our affirmations of faith and our pretty words mean nothing.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, THE RISEN CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! Amen.

John 20:19-31 - comments

Perhaps we also need Thomas to bear witness to all that is "other" in our world, blamed for an ever-expanding litany of sins, but in the end summoning the faith and the courage to proclaim, "*My Lord and my God!*" "Doubts, questions and skepticism often lead to deeper faith and larger faith."

OFFERING QUOTE

Money is like manure – it should be spread around.

Brooke Astor (1902-2007), philanthropist, socialite, writer

PRAYER OF APPROACH

Holy God, Lover of your children: the tomb has been opened, and we dance into your future.

Your life has dawned on us, and we surround you with our praise.

You reach out your hand, and lead us into joy.

Jesus Christ, Faithful Witness: you pick open the locked doors of our hearts and come in to be with us forever.

You breathe peace into our souls, so we may bring healing to a troubled world.

Holy Spirit, Breath of Peace: you show us our hearts, so we may give love to others.

You show us our hands, sending us to serve the needy.

You show us your hope, so we may live in your joy.

When our faith stands at the grave, grieving for a stone that's rolled away, forgive us.

When our faith is short of understanding though the truth is there to see, forgive us.

When our faith, beset by doubt, sees no further than an empty tomb today, forgive us.

Bring to mind the cry of Mary, *'I have seen the Lord!'* and grant us faith to believe! AMEN.

Assurance of Pardon (from Psalm 16):

The Lord is our chosen portion and our cup.

God binds us in, counsels our minds and instructs our hearts.

God helps us to stand firm for justice, mercy and peace.

When we fall, God lifts us up, forgives us,

and remembers our sins no more. Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of new Life, Christ came speaking words of peace and understanding.

Thank you for strengthening our faith and empowering us to live with hope and trust in you day by day.

We are grateful that you give us courage to face our fears and struggles, patience to endure moments when the way ahead is not clear, and resilience in the face of new realities.

Loving God, we pray for the many places of brokenness in our world. We think especially of those suffering in the COVID-19 outbreak, those with the disease, those who have lost loved ones, those working hard to respond to the pandemic, and those who have lost work or lost hope., In these moments of quiet, we name the situations on our hearts today, all those places in need of your restoration.

We ask that the whole earth will experience your gift of new life and hope.

We pray for those who struggle with their experience of the church. Open them to your love and grace so that any pain the church has caused will be healed. Guide us with your Spirit of wisdom to know how to live out our faith in ways that create pathways for others to find you, not barriers.

We pray for my church family, for The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and for the Church of Jesus Christ in every country and culture. In these days of unexpected challenge, when worship and fellowship have been disrupted, strengthen our trust in you and our concern for others. Make us good stewards

of time apart to reflect on your presence with your people in circumstances of deep challenge. Help us maintain the joy we know in the Risen Christ.

We also pray for ourselves, our family and friends, our neighbourhoods and community.
We lay before you in silence all the people and concerns on our hearts and minds today:

- *Front-line health care workers, researchers, caregivers, decision makers*
- *Truck drivers, cleaners, factory workers, farmers, fishers, utility workers,*
- *Those who grieve, or suffer, or worry every day*

Grant them strength, peace of mind and spirit, and hope for tomorrow
We are grateful that we can place all our worries and our hopes into your hands, O God, knowing that you will hear us and respond.

Hear us now as we offer the words our Risen Lord taught us to say...

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction

Go forth in joy. You have God's kingdom in your heart.
Go forth in love. Live for the Lord.
Go with hope and forgiveness. The grace of God sustains.
Go forth in peace. Go forth in light.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR AND THE HOLY SPIRIT... AMEN

CHRIST IS RISEN!!

HE IS RISEN INDEED!!