

Sarah Kerr

Easter 2 Sermon: "Doubt, Faith, and the Disciple"

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St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Easter Day is a day filled with so much joy that it spills over into the next seven weeks of the church year. During the Easter season, we take seven Sundays in a row to trace the ripple effect of the resurrection, as more and more people, from Mary Magdalene to Thomas to the rest of the disciples, encounter the risen Jesus in the flesh and join the apostle Peter in saying, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." Today the gospel reading focuses first on Jesus' appearance to his disciples all together, and then on Jesus' return visit to his disciple Thomas. Now Thomas, as you may know, has gotten a reputation for being something of a skeptic. He's often called "doubting Thomas" for refusing to believe that Jesus had indeed come back from the dead. At times readers have concluded that this story dismisses doubt and those who struggle with it, as though its moral is, "Faith in Jesus isn't so difficult, and anyone who has a hard time believing isn't really cut out to be Jesus' disciple." But when we take a close look at this story this morning, we may begin to see Thomas and his questioning in a new light, as we consider how he responds first to the disciples and then to Jesus. We may see Jesus in a new light too, as we consider the way that he responds to Thomas. This story may teach us about what it means to wrestle with doubt, as well as what it means to have faith in Jesus today.

First of all, consider how Thomas responds to the disciples' news that they have seen Jesus. Thomas had the misfortune of being away on the night that Jesus made his first appearance to the disciples, who were huddled together in a locked room, afraid that their connection to Jesus might make them an easy target for harassment or even punishment. They're also afraid because they've heard that Jesus' body is missing; Mary thinks he has come back to life, but others say that his body has been stolen. Suddenly a man who looks like Jesus himself shows up in the room, telling them "Peace be with you." Could it be him? He lifts up his hands and there they see nail marks; it is the same Jesus they saw die just a few days earlier. Suddenly their palpable fear turns to palpable joy, as Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit, who will guide and strengthen them once Jesus is no longer in their midst. It is all almost too good to be true, except it is happening right before their very eyes. Surely one of the disciples turned to another and said, "Wait'll we tell Thomas!" But when Thomas returns from his unnamed errand and the disciples eagerly rush at him,

shouting about how they've seen Jesus alive, Thomas does not receive their news with enthusiasm. Instead, Thomas tells them that he won't believe it until he can have this first-hand experience for himself: "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."

If you look into how Thomas tends to get treated for this reaction, you'll find him described as stubborn, hardheaded, and too rationalistic. Imagine, however, what it would really be like to hear that someone whom you loved and who had died had come back to life. Recently I read a story that helped me to see how Thomas' response might stem from his love for Jesus, not from his skepticism. It is the story of a young college student named Whitney, who along with nine other people from her school was involved in a head-on collision on the highway. Only five of the ten people survived the accident, including one student named Laura who remained in the hospital in critical condition for several weeks after the accident. Tragically, the other five, including Whitney, did not survive. Whitney's parents got the worst phone call of their lives, telling them the news of their daughter's death. They held a memorial service and buried her in their hometown, trusting that she was now with God, but grieving over her tragic death at such a young age.

Six weeks after Whitney's death, her mother Colleen was awoken in the middle of the night by another phone call from a man claiming to be the hospital coroner. Colleen was confused as to why he would be calling them. She woke up her other daughter Carly, and they both listened as the coroner told them that the hospital had discovered through dental records that Laura, the accident survivor in the hospital, was not actually Laura. That was shocking enough, but what the coroner said next was unbelievable: "We have reason to believe that your daughter is alive... that the girl identified as Laura Van Ryn is, in fact, your daughter, Whitney Cerak."

Now, while Colleen sat in shock, Carly reacted instantly against the idea that her sister could be alive, putting down the phone and yelling, "Hang up the phone, Mom. I can't believe someone would pull such a cruel prank. This is the worst thing I've ever heard of in my life! Mom, you don't actually believe this garbage, do you? Just hang up the phone!" As Carly describes it later, she refused to entertain any hope that her sister could be alive, because if those hopes were dashed, it would feel like she had lost her sister all over again. Her love for her sister made her refuse to believe the coroner's words.

Maybe Thomas's reason for his unbelief is similar to Carly's. Maybe he refuses to believe, not because he's stubborn or skeptical, but because he loved Jesus so much that he can't begin to hope that Jesus might actually be alive. Earlier in this gospel, we see Thomas demonstrating his radical commitment to Jesus, when Jesus decides to travel near Jerusalem, where the authorities were plotting to kill him. Thomas responds by telling his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." This resolve suggests that Thomas is a passionate man who is so committed to Jesus that he is ready to die for him. For Thomas, believing that Jesus might be alive is too much for him to bear.

We learn from Thomas' response to the disciples that those who struggle with doubts are not necessarily trying to be stubborn or resistant. Sometimes those who question or doubt are those who really realize what is at stake if this or that is actually true. Rather than easily accepting unbelievable things, they are acutely aware of how bizarre it is to say that someone actually came back from the dead. They are aware of what a major departure this would be from the history of humankind. When people die, they stay dead, and that's that. Those who question may do so because they know that if Jesus really has risen from the dead, that will mean changing everything about how they see the world, and about how they see Jesus, and they aren't quite ready to go through that transformation yet. So Thomas responds to their news not so much with disbelief as with a challenge, stating what he'll need in order to believe in Jesus: "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."

And this leads us on to consider Jesus' response to Thomas' challenge. How might Jesus have responded? Jesus could have said, "If Thomas is going to be stubborn, then I'm not going to appear to him until he gets some faith. I'm not going to bother with someone who won't believe in me." Jesus could have decided that Thomas wasn't fit to be a disciple and taken his name off the list. But instead, Jesus takes on Thomas' challenge by making another appearance to his disciples, this time scheduling it on a night when Thomas is with them. And this time Jesus addresses Thomas personally, offering Thomas what he asked for: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Jesus does not scoff at Thomas' reasons for not believing in him; rather, Jesus provides exactly what Thomas says he will need in order to believe. When Jesus says to Thomas, "Do not doubt but believe," I think that subconsciously we hear an additional little phrase at the end of Jesus' words... "Do not doubt but believe... *or else!*" suggesting that Jesus is rebuking Thomas's challenge with a frown and ordering him to have faith. But considering

the joyful tone that surrounds Jesus' appearances to his disciples, I believe that Jesus' words to Thomas are not a rebuke but an invitation to confident, joyful faith. The disciples need no longer live in fear of the world or doubt about who Jesus is; the resurrection has shown them that he is really the Messiah they had been hoping for. The disciples need not disbelieve, now that the unbelievable has happened. So we learn here that Jesus does not distance himself from the disciple with questions or reservations about believing in him; rather, Jesus respects his concerns and addresses them directly, calling him to joyful and confident faith.

And now we come to the third and final response, the way that Thomas responds to Jesus' appearance. Imagine the moment of realizing that someone you love is not dead as you thought but is alive. For those left in suspense about Whitney and her family, let me finish the story. Colleen and Carly drove four hours to the hospital where the girl identified as Laura had been recovering from multiple injuries. When they arrived to the girl's room, they stepped inside, shaking with anticipation, but once they saw her, all they could say is "It's her! It's Whitney! It's really her! She is alive!" The daughter whose death they had grieved had actually been alive this whole time, and their grief turned to joy. I imagine that Thomas felt the same sort of elation too. Thomas looks at this man before him who bears the wounds of the cross, and he knows that this is the same man whom Thomas had followed, the one for whom Thomas was willing to give his life. But in Thomas' case, it's more than just receiving a loved one who hadn't actually died. No, this was the same man who had really died, and now he was living again on the other side of death, never to die again. And this return from the grave meant that Jesus had a very special identity, as we see in Thomas' words: "My Lord and my God!" Thomas' reaction is not simply, "Good to have you back, buddy!" No, it is to worship Jesus as Lord and God. Jesus' triumph over death shows that he is more than just a good teacher. If Jesus has power over death, then he must be the Lord of all creation, God made human and come to earth.

So we learn that Thomas' challenge doesn't lead to condemnation but becomes the opportunity for him to see Jesus for who he truly is. Perhaps Thomas' movement from doubt to faith challenges the common idea that doubt and faith are pitted to each other on opposite ends of a spectrum. Here Thomas' unbelief and his belief are more like two sides of one coin, because his doubt, rather than leading him away from God, becomes the opportunity for God to become more real to him. Thomas's story encourages us that doubt and questions don't necessarily have to become walls between us and God; rather, they can

be the doorway to greater wisdom and understanding. In fact, if you've listened to people's stories about why they believe, many say that their faith came about after a time of questioning or doubt, when they gave God a challenge and then it was met in such a way that they came to joyful, confident faith. Questions and doubt are not necessarily opposed to faith; rather, those questions can lead us into an encounter with Jesus unlike anything we have experienced before.

We have much to learn from this story about Thomas. However, we can't help but notice that our situation is different from Thomas'; we do not have the exact same opportunity to see Jesus personally. Jesus says that in the future some will believe without getting the chance to see, and they will be blessed for it. Just as with Thomas, Jesus provides ways for us to believe. This passage suggests that we have three special gifts that help us move towards faith. First, we come to faith through the gift of this gospel account. The gospel writer says at the end that he has written these things about Jesus, "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." One of the ways that people come to faith in Jesus is through reading about him in the Bible. If you are struggling with questions about Jesus and who he was, I would recommend trying to read this Gospel of John closely and honestly, and look for Jesus in its pages. Second, we come to faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the one whom Jesus breathes upon the disciples when he appears to them, the one who will comfort and strengthen them. The Holy Spirit stirs faith within us by speaking to us as we read Scripture and teaching us the truth about Jesus. And third, we come to faith through the community of other disciples around us. Just as disciples clustered around Thomas to tell him the news that Jesus had risen, so today we gather this morning with those who also say "we have seen the Lord." In times of questioning or doubt, the faith of others can carry us on and lead us into a place of faith. Through these three gifts, Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the community, God has provided for us so that the joy of Easter can continue to ripple through our lives until the day when we, like Thomas, see Jesus face to face.