

The Tides of Faith: Doubting Thomas

John 20:19-31

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May the God...

Good Morning!

“Unless I see the mark of nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thus says Thomas, for my money, the most practical man in all of scripture.

Continuously he is the one who lifts his hand, asks the questions, raises the issues and says, “Ah tell me a little bit more about that Jesus—I’m not so sure that I get it.”

And all the while, as I’m reading, I’m applauding, offering my own commentary, thanking him for asking what I want to know and what the others around Jesus seem incapable of voicing.

Thomas gets most of his press from this morning’s reading—but today’s activities are actually a culmination of his questions and interactions. The apostle Thomas appears in all four gospels. Earlier on when Jesus is making plans to go to see Lazarus’ sisters, Martha and Mary—despite the very real possibility that the crowds will be overtly hostile to Jesus and his followers, Thomas says to the other apostles, “Let’s go too—we might as well die with him.” Thomas is loyal.

Later, when Jesus is talking about his final destiny and how he will soon go to prepare a place for his apostles and then how he will meet the apostles in this special place. Thomas asks, what everyone else is thinking, “Uh—we don’t know where you’re going—so actually we do not know how to get there,” to which Jesus replies, “I am the way the truth and the life.” Not exactly a roadmap for an answer, but more than they knew before. Thomas isn’t afraid to ask for a little bit more from Jesus. Thomas is practical.

So when Thomas misses Jesus’ first appearance—up from the grave—it makes perfect sense for him to want proof. It’s completely in character for him to say to his friends, “I’m not going to believe until I see the wounds and feel the scabs.” Thomas is truthful—and he is literal.

Throughout the scriptures Thomas asks Jesus to qualify his pronouncements and explain his predictions. While the other apostles nod cluelessly—Thomas is the one who asks, “What exactly do you mean?” As I said, Thomas asks the questions to which I want to know the answers.

Thomas models for us the notion that a faithful believer is not an individual of blind, unswerving faith but rather someone who is engaged using all of the intellect and gifts that God has given to them.

We can question, doubt and believe all at the same time.

Thomas got the ultimate answer to his doubts. I suspect there isn't a person among us who wouldn't mind having the opportunity to do as Thomas did—to see Jesus—up from the grave—wounds in hand—with an open invitation from the divine to touch and see; to feel and to know. Sadly, attractive as that option is we cannot have Thomas' real life experience. So how then do we believe?

We believe—we get by—as I believe Thomas got by in those eight intervening days between Jesus' first appearance and his second. Thomas got by—through the faith of the community. They saw, they believed.

While that might not have been enough to open Thomas' mind—it was enough to keep him fully engaged. He didn't flee from town—tell them they were nuts. He stayed. He stayed connected to and with the community enough so that he was in their company—the next time Jesus appeared. More than anything else Thomas was not alone.

Here's the thing: Faith is a gift from God that is deepened by our doubts and questions and frequently sustained for us by those who love us.

We won't get a Technicolor appearance of Jesus. We lack that. But we, like Thomas, we do have a community; a community of faithful doubters and believers.

Personally, my faith is much like the waters of a bay, ebbing and flowing, waxing and waning, depending upon the pull and push of the tide. I'm not talking the relatively calm three foot tides of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland or the non-existent tides of the Great Lakes—but rather the twenty-one feet “the boat's way up here and then six hours later its laying on its side, no water to be found” West Coast of Scotland tides.

I believe and then I don't. It comes and goes. One hour, water nourishing my soul, six hours later nothing but mucky mud, no water to be seen. I know it in my soul and then doubt my mind. Faith is like water cupped in my hand—squeeze too tight and it leaks out the sides.

So then what? That's when I'm jealous of Thomas, but give thanks for the Apostles. For it is specifically and invariably during those times when I'm having the hardest time believing that someone will come to me, mention in passing, tell me on Zoom, confess on the phone how absolutely amazingly active God has been in their life.

Their belief—your belief, enables me to believe again. The water flows, my parched soul is fed. I think faith works much like how friends of mine in recovery describe their early days. They'd just stopped drinking and were unsure how they'd even stay sober. But

they'd go to meetings—once, twice, sometimes three times a day and listen to the stories of people just like them—how they'd struggled and failed but now day by day—morning by morning, their lives are different.

My friends say—they still don't know what the future would hold for them—but they know having heard the witness of their friends—they now can make it through one more day.

Faith is like that. Faith is a gift from God—deepened by our doubts and questions—frequently sustained for us by those who love us. We do it for each other, as the apostles did for Thomas, carrying and sustaining one another in times of doubts and uncertainty. It was that way for Thomas, it is I believe, that way for us.

Alleluia—Christ is Risen! How do I know? You've told me so.

The Lord is Risen indeed Alleluia!

Amen.