

“Not Doubting, But Courageous”

John 20:19-31

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Rather than a faithless skeptic, Thomas is a courageous believer who reminds us of the importance of abiding in sacred community.

*“As we experience the story of Thomas, we are invited to trust that Jesus will keep showing up, alive, and with a body that holds together the worst that has happened to him and his risen life.”
(Mary Hinkle Shore, workingpreacher.org, 4/8/2018)*

Someone asked me the other day, “What is your vision for Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church?” Generally, I tend to resist answering those sorts of questions, only because I believe that a church’s vision is a gift from God that emerges from the ministry of God’s people together. It is not the sole province of the pastor, but rather a result of the entire congregation, pastor and people working together.

But I also know that a pastor without a vision is a bit like a car without brakes or steering. He or she is liable to go in several directions at one time without stopping. And I also know that in this moment – this unique, difficult and extraordinary time – vision is essential.

Vision is also complex. It represents our unique calling to serve and worship in this place. Our vision is shaped by the realities of this moment, and by the reminder that the pandemic has changed everything – the way we live, the ways we work, the ways we worship.

And based on that, I believe that our vision for ministry can mirror the experiences of the early church in the days following Jesus’ resurrection. In these great 50 days of Easter we become the church by telling stories of resurrection.

Stories of resurrection remind us that death does not have the last word. The most feared moment of all has been conquered by Christ. We will not face that moment or any other moment alone.

Which is why we should not call Thomas doubting, but courageous.

I have a good friend and writing colleague named Tom. As a talented writer and pastor, he takes as his personal mission the educating of the church about the ways society has maligned his name. You might think (as I did) that this is somewhat of a trifling matter. But then Tom pointed out to me our long history of maligning people named Tom.

Consider: “Tommyrot” is an old phrase for rubbish and junk; calling a man a “tom cat” is not a compliment; engaging in “Tom Foolery” is not much better and calling a girl a “tom boy” is completely outdated and considered rude. Even the great writer J.K. Rowling named her great villain Tom, and of course we all know what happened to the poor man named Tom who happened to catch a glimpse of Lady Godiva on her legendary ride through town.

And of course, “Doubting Thomas.”

Some of our friends have reminded Tom that he should not complain too much: there’s no such thing as a “dear Tom” letter, no one ever asks for his Tom Hancock on a piece of paper, nor do we rent “Port-a-Tommy’s” for sporting events and concerts. But my friend makes a good point about the dereliction associated with his good name, especially when we look at the way we have turned Thomas the disciple into a villainous skeptic.

“Oh, don’t be a doubting Thomas,” we say. “Be patient, have faith! The sound on the church’s live stream will be just fine!”

But even worse are the ways we have told ourselves and others that doubt is the enemy of faith.

In a brilliant new book, writer Brian McLaren describes the ways our preoccupation with doubt as the enemy of faith has shut out millions of people who no longer attend church.¹ He observes how the tides of doubt have increased among younger generations and suggests too often Christianity has mistakenly associated *doubting* with a *rejection of faith*. But *unquestioned, unexamined faith is anemic*. McLaren points out how doubt can become an important step of possible growth in faith, which is often short-circuited by those who are afraid of doubt. For these younger people, McLaren says, “if they don’t find genuine understanding and intelligent support to face and process their doubts while

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt* (New York: St. Martin’s Publishing Group, 2021)

they're still in the first hall of life...by the second have...they'll be long gone from religion and finished with faith for good.”²

There is a vision for what we might be able to become: a place where doubt can lead to faith.

So, let's be gentle with Thomas. Put aside the tendency to see Thomas as a lesser disciple, or a skeptical enemy. Instead, begin to see Thomas as courageous, a brave disciple who strives to square his beliefs with the reality of the world as he experiences it.

I suspect Thomas would have been the sort of friend your mother would have liked you to hang out with in high school. He's not easily persuaded. Peer pressure has no effect on him. He's never afraid to hide his suspicions and does not merely go along with the crowd. Thomas is not doubting but brave and courageous.

Thomas makes his first appearance in John's gospel back in John 11. Word has come to Jesus and the disciples that their friend Lazarus has died. Jesus uses the moment to talk about his own impending death, but the disciples are clueless. Facing these odds, Thomas dryly comments, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” Later, in chapter 14, Jesus is again talking about his death, remarking “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

The problem is that the disciples do not have a clue what Jesus is saying. So once more Thomas finds the courage to speak up while the others remain silent. He looks at Jesus and says “Lord, we don't know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

Thomas is a blunt realist. His is the voice that speaks the questions others are afraid to ask. He is, one commentator says, “a straight shooter, a practical guy. He may not have much imagination or sense of mystery, but he does have an enquiring mind. Thomas asks the tough questions that others are scared or embarrassed to ask.”³

Thomas the believer is not with the disciples that Easter evening when Jesus appears. They are huddled together in a locked room, shut off from the world.

² McLaren, p. xiv

³ Jamie Clark-Soles *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2016).

The air is thick with pain and confusion, grief and sadness—it almost feels like a wake. They are scared – even though Mary has told them the good news that Jesus is risen.

Even though they have heard the good news that Jesus has been raised, they remain lockdown. Scared and afraid, they've barricaded themselves inside this upper room, and drawn the blinds.

Yet Jesus still appears. They do not go seeking Jesus; Jesus comes looking for them. That is the promise of Easter.

It is the promise that comes to Thomas some eight days after Easter. And it is the promise that comes to us thousands of years down the road: Jesus keeps showing up, despite our fears, our lack of courage, our doubts, and questions.

And that is the story the church must tell. Jesus gives us the message, and then sends us off with a blessing: "Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus appears, scars and all, reminding us that the scars and marks we bear will also become the sources of new life and new hope to those around us.

Why Thomas was not there we do not know. Maybe he went to get some ice. Perhaps Thomas is claustrophobic. Or maybe Thomas had just enough courage that remaining locked up in a room did not make any sense to him. For whatever reason, Thomas was not there. And when the others tell him they have seen Jesus, Thomas remains steadfast to his hard-headed realism.

"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."

But notice that he never says, "You're lying." He does not write off their experiences. Instead, he yearns for the same experience of Jesus that they have had.

Thomas is not the only one who has been wrestling with doubts—I have, and you have as well. And in the time of great fear and confusion, Jesus appears.

In many ways, this moment of history finds us a bit like the early disciples. We are cut off, scared, unsure of what we are to do, doors locked, windows shut. It's Easter, but we are still waiting for the resurrection.

Thomas was no heretic. His journey of faith is important for us, because in Thomas, we see ourselves. We learn doubt is not the opposite of believing. Indeed, as Paul Tillich has observed "doubt is an element of faith." The great theologian continued, "Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless and doubt to the faithful." As St. Anselm said, faith seeks understanding.

It takes courage to become like Thomas. It takes courage to step forward and let your questions be heard. It even takes, might we say, more than just a little faith. It takes a great deal of faith to wait to see Jesus.

And that, I believe, could be the most important gift a church could offer.

Amen.