

# *In Defense of Doubters*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet

April 23, 2017

John 20:19-31

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I feel like Thomas has gotten a bum rap. Thomas may have been one of the most brave and honest of all the disciples, according to the glimpses we have of him in the gospel of John. Thomas is mentioned four times, and each time he appears in a moment of great significance, but he is forever remembered solely from this story as “Doubting Thomas.” At the Raising of Lazarus, for example, when the disciples receive the news that Lazarus has died, Jesus says, “Let us go to him.” All the other disciples say: “Lord, you should not go to Bethany, it’s too close to Jerusalem,” because they knew the religious leaders were out to get him.

Thomas also knew the risk, but he looked at the others and said boldly, “Let us also go (with Jesus), that we may die with him.” This is a picture of extreme courage, why do we not call him “Brave Thomas” instead of *Doubting*? A little later on, in John 14, when Jesus was talking to his disciples about going ahead of them in death saying: “So that where I am, there you may be also.” Thomas pipes up again. In the middle of this mysterious and circular conversation about Jesus preparing a heavenly home, it was Thomas who was honest to plead: “Lord Jesus, how can we know the way?” Jesus did not seem to mind

Thomas' question at all. With no hint of judgment, he answered simply, "I am the way, the truth and the life." If you've ever been in class, afraid to raise your hand and ask a question, but hoping desperately that someone else will stop the teacher and ask for further explanation, then Thomas is your patron saint. Why do we not call him, "Honest Thomas?" Once brave to follow Jesus into danger, and here honest in asking for understanding, how can the only label we pin on Thomas be "Doubting"?

Besides, Thomas' reaction to the news of resurrection may be the most believable of all. It is the evening of the first day of the week, and the doors are locked. The disciples are anxious, shut tightly inside, afraid that whoever came after Jesus, with hammer and nail, might very soon come after them. Then, defying locked doors, and fearful hearts and vision blurred by tears, Jesus simply appears. Since he was not in the room, I understand why Thomas did not believe it happened. It is a lot to take in, to go from watching a friend get arrested, to the place of execution, to the strange rumors of an empty tomb, to the appearance of a resurrected body. I stand in defense of Thomas and all the doubters with him, because I think his faith is a lot like mine, and probably, a lot like yours.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson said in his poem *In Memoriam*: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."<sup>1</sup> I do believe that: There lives more faith in honest doubt, than in half the creeds. At the extraordinary and unexpected news of resurrection, Thomas proclaims honest doubt saying: Unless I see the signs of crucifixion, I will not believe. He was asking for something tangible: "Give me more than the whisper of a rumor, more than his familiar voice passing the peace; give me something to hold on to if I am to believe." His struggle to understand is indeed a brave and honest quest, much like mine, and I imagine much like yours.

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan Andrews, "Jesus Appears," *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.

The interesting thing is Jesus himself, in these closing chapters of John, seems to know that there are different kinds of believers, and he is eager to be known to them all. For Jesus reveals himself in a variety of ways: His voice calls out to Mary in the garden who recognizes him at the familiar sound of her name. Jesus breaks through the locked up fear of the disciples, and stands before them, so that he can be seen. He breathes on them so that they can feel the wind of his spirit. Later, he will prepare breakfast on the beach and eat with them again.

In each of these resurrection appearances there is some audible, visible, tangible presence of the one, they had seen crucified. But only... among the very first witnesses. John uses Thomas' initial doubt to draw an even wider circle around the experience of resurrection, telling us why the whole gospel was written, so that others who have not had such visible, tangible proof may also come to believe. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" he says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and *yet* have come to believe." John is basically saying – we come to believe through the church centered around the Bible. Faith spreads through relationship, in the community of the Risen, Living Christ!

It's through the men and women, the Thomases, and the Marys, through Peter, James and John, through Joanna and Lydia and all the others who have not seen but have come to believe! John wanted to encourage belief in people like us, who would never have the chance to see that empty tomb, or hear Jesus speak our name beside it, or touch his wounds, or have that one last shared meal. We are the ones John is inviting into the story – who have little direct evidence and no tangible proof, but who know through this encounter with Thomas, that Jesus makes room for our honest doubt, so that we may come to believe. "Blessed are those who have not seen." That is who we are, those who have come to believe because of the witness of the church.

Today is a great day of celebration in the life of this Church. Because during the meeting after worship, the calls we will vote to extend to Frank Pottorff and Mary Steege, are about being the church, about bearing witness to the Risen Lord, whom we never had the privilege to see, on the first day of the week after the resurrection, but in whom we have, nonetheless, come to believe. Frank is being called to share this good news with visitors and new members, and to help all of us engage in meaningful, life-giving discipleship, by strengthening our sense of Christian community, nurture and generosity. Mary is being called to lead our ministries of compassion and care, as we love and support one another through all the seasons of life. Hers is a witness to the hopeful, joyous gospel of the living presence of Christ himself – in our lives from beginning to end.

Today we are building up the church of the Risen Christ together, re-committing ourselves to share this Easter gospel with those who, like Thomas, and who, like us, have not seen and yet come to believe! Who come to feel the presence of the Living Christ when we gather, and when we go out to serve in his name.

You know, little is known about the rest of Thomas' life. Tradition holds that he traveled as a missionary to India, was killed with a spear, and was buried near Madras. An ancient cross still marks his supposed burial place, and the Syrian Christians on India's Malabar Coast still claim Thomas as their founder, describing themselves as the "St. Thomas Christians." He is also the patron saint of architects, based on a colorful tale in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas. An Indian king gave Thomas a large sum of money to build a palace, for which the king had produced plans. Instead, Thomas spent the money on the poor, "thus building a palace in heaven."<sup>2</sup>

Thomas, we have come to believe, moved from honest doubt to the certainty of exclamation saying, "My Lord, and my God." If that is the

---

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Hallam, general editor, *Saints: Who Are They and How they Help You*, p. 121.

outcome of his initial doubt, he is worthy of defending; he is among the best of company for all of us to keep.

AMEN.