

# *Community of Faith*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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John 20:19-31

19 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.'

24 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.’

26 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.’

30 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.

The church in which I grew up has a massive stone relief carving located at the back of the chancel depicting the Last Supper almost life size. The twelve disciples are piled up on each other, leaning in to the center and across the long table as if they were afraid to miss any of what Jesus might have been saying to them. They are an interesting looking group of men, and the artist who created the piece took pains to give each one a look or expression of his very own. As a member of the children's choir we were required to sit through the entire service in which we sat not with our parents but up front in small wooden chairs lining the chancel. I vividly remember passing the hour during worship studying this piece of art, wondering which disciple was which and what they might have been thinking.

The truth is, among these twelve men, a very small portion of them stand out in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. Of course we all know Peter and John, maybe even James, Judas. I myself would be hard pressed to tell you one single thing about Bartholomew or Thaddeus.

This second Sunday of Easter, every year, is dedicated to this morning's story of the disciples and in particular the disciple Thomas – or rather doubting Thomas as we have all been taught to call him. The writer of the fourth Gospel is the only one that gives Thomas such a large/or relatively large role in the drama. In fact the story of Christ's appearance to the group of disciples and then again to Thomas is not found in any other Gospel account of the resurrection.

Thomas has come to represent the doubter – the stubborn believer, the one always seeking more information, or proof. The Gospel of Thomas – from the Gnostic Christian communities, not included in the Bible we recognize today. It is a collection of sayings of Jesus – teaching of Jesus that were particularly upheld by the Gnostic communities – Gnostic itself comes from the Greek word for knowing – knowledge. That really is what Thomas is after in this morning's passage – more information, better firsthand knowledge.

Scholar David Lose has written about the ways that we have misunderstood the struggles of Thomas:

“Truth be told, I think Thomas gets a bit of a bad rap. I don't think he's a "doubter" as much as he is a realist. I mean, he saw Jesus nailed to the cross and die. And so you can't blame him for wanting a real encounter with a really risen Lord just like the other disciples got.”<sup>1</sup>

And that's what strikes me about this story: the realism. Not just of Thomas, but the realism also about how hard it can be to believe, at times. When you read through the resurrection accounts of all four gospels, you quickly realize that Thomas is not alone in his doubt. In fact, doubt isn't the exception but the rule. No one -- even after all the predictions -- no one says, "Welcome back." Or "We knew it." Or even "What took you so long, we've been expecting you?" No. No one anticipates Jesus return and when he shows up, everyone doubts. Everyone.

What is so interesting to me about the story of Thomas is that nothing is written about the week in between his declaration that he could not yet believe and Jesus' second appearance to the disciples. Not one disciple tells him to pack his bags and find another group to hang out with. No one tells him that his inability to believe at the moment meant that he could no longer count himself among the disciples. Jesus does not appear to Thomas *alone* later, but comes to him when he is gathered with the community of disciples. It didn't matter for the disciples that Thomas was unable to believe – their belief filled in for him until he could believe for himself.

We as Presbyterians seek to be a community of disciples like this, many of whom are like those first disciples who needed time to work it out, to consider how their experiences fit with who they knew Jesus to be. A community of disciples that didn't kick out Thomas for speaking his skepticism, but one that kept him around until he found the proof that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/05/john-20-24-25/>

he needed to make an even stronger declaration than Christ is risen – but that Christ is Lord and God.

But the only way that any church or community can actually embody this kind of gracious and nurture is if two things are present – first people willing to share their struggles and their doubts and second people who aren't made anxious by those question who are willing to accompany them through that journey of faith.

Rachel Held Evans, a popular Christian author who has shared her journey from a very strict and unyielding Christian community to one of welcome and grace, talks about what it meant for her to articulate her doubts in a community where no one was interested or willing to hear them:<sup>2</sup>

*It's a question often posed to me by well-meaning friends and acquaintances when they learn that occasionally I wake up in the morning unsure if there is a God: Why can't you just have more faith?*

*With exacerbation in their voice, they urge me to stop reading so much, stop thinking so much, and stop asking so many uncomfortable questions. My doubt, they conclude, reflects a concerted act of rebellion against God that I can start or stop at will. My doubt, they say, would vanish in an instant if I would just pay more attention to all the things God is doing in the world, if I would just have a little more faith.*

*These conversations can be frustrating for sure, and I'm only now beginning to accept the fact that I can't drag unwavering believers along on my journey any more than they can drag me along on theirs. Learning to dialog in a loving, affirming way can be tricky, but recently I've discovered a rather succinct way of explaining my predicament.*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/duck-rabbit>

*When people ask, Why can't you just have more faith? I say, Because I've seen the rabbit. You've probably seen the famous optical illusion of the duck and rabbit.*

*For most of my life, I could only see the duck. I interpreted everything that happened around me and within me as acts of God. He was the only explanation for how the world came to be, how people managed to be good to one another, how believers had religious experiences, how things always worked together for good, how the day after I prayed for this or that I just happened to receive this or that.*

*I looked at the pattern and saw only a duck. How anyone could see anything else was simply beyond me. It was a duck—plain and simple.*

*Then one day I saw the rabbit. It happened rather suddenly and it startled me. In one shocking moment, just as clearly as I could see the duck, I could see another pattern that explained the world: chance, wishful thinking, self-delusion, self-centeredness, superstition, fear, projection, science, psychology, coincidence, politics.*

*It's not that I stopped seeing the duck. It's just that once I saw the rabbit, the picture made sense both ways. So in day-to-day life, I tend to switch between the two. At one moment I see the duck, at another I see the rabbit—two creatures in one pattern, two explanations for whatever just occurred.*

*It's an imperfect metaphor of course, The point is, telling me that there's no rabbit isn't going to help. Telling me to ignore the rabbit isn't going to help. Telling me that I'm a sinner for seeing the rabbit isn't going to help.*

I would guess that it is the fear of just this kind of response to our questions and our doubts that keeps many of us from articulating them. So this means that we each have to consider which parts of our faith and tradition are unwavering for us and how we respond graciously to

someone who has questions about them – do we listen with open hearts and minds or do we dismiss them as unfaithful. Do we engage in helpful ways with those whose experiences and beliefs are different than ours or do we avoid those who are not like us, even in a place where we would claim to hold so much in common.

The flip side of this of is that we need to be willing to share our struggles in spite of the strange or difficult reactions we might get. Sometimes just speaking our questions or our doubts out loud in a safe place makes them feel less heavy on our hearts and souls. I know that conversations like these happen all the time in classes and Bible Studies here, and I consider it a privilege when someone opens up in a group about something that they are struggling with. Especially for me, who sometimes might come off as having more questions than answers, it is wonderful to hear from another person, especially one who in all other contexts might seem to have it all together, to know that even that person who we might all consider a pillar of faith, even they have questions and doubts.

In just a few moments we will invite our elders and deacons forward to be ordained and installed into leadership for our community, and even within that liturgy you will hear them affirm their faith in Jesus Christ and declare a willingness to uphold and maintain our traditions and beliefs. But in practice what this means is that they are committing to be engaged in conversations of faith as leaders of this congregation - studying and being guided by the faith that has guided Christians, and Presbyterians, and even this particular congregation for generations. Not as a litmus test for faith, but as a public commitment to be a part of building up and nurturing the ever evolving faith of this church.

So as we remember Thomas this day and his community of friends, we all recommit ourselves to walk this Easter life together through the Mountains and the Valleys of faith, knowing that one of the most important things that we cannot doubt or deny is that we are made better by being on this journey together in a spirit of grace and love. Amen.