

“Harboring a Doubter”
John 20:19-31
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2nd Sunday of Easter
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I am Thomas, the doubter, unconvinced by testimony, unchanged by personal witness. I have trouble believing that Christ is raised. I have trouble because the dead do not rise up from their graves and live again. I have seen the dead lie in their coffins, still as stone, ready for the grave. I know that all living things come to an end. I know that we all must say goodbye to the people we love.

I am Thomas, suspicious of religious fervor, suspicious of denial masked as faith. Neither emotion, nor optimism, nor wishful thinking can substitute for reason in my book. Everything must be tested. Everything must be proven. And rational piece of data that I know confirms that people cannot be raised from the dead. I am Thomas, the doubter.

It's not that I disbelieve the power of prayer or healing or faith. I followed Jesus because I believed in his teachings. I believed him when he said that we have within our community the power to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to include everyone who has been put on the margins because of the way we look, or the way we talk, or where we were born. I believed him when he said that so much of our pain can be cured by a community of people who welcome those who have been excluded in the past. I believed him when we said that a nation or a city will be judged by what happens to its poor – its widows, and orphans, and children. I believed him and I still do.

I am Thomas, the doubter, but I do not doubt everything. I do not doubt that there are things in this world that I do not understand. Some call them miracles. I call them simply phenomena that are not yet understood. Standing with Jesus I have observed one of those miracles. I was with him when we went to see our friend Lazarus. His sister begged him to hurry and come before he died. Jesus said coldly and plainly he is dead. I said sarcastically, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” We went toward the tomb. The stone was there. I saw it. I did smell the stench. And I saw the man walk out still in his bands of burial cloth. I was stunned like the rest of the crowd. I have never seen anything like it. Yet still, there must be some reasonable explanation. Dead people do not come back from the dead. More likely, he had been in a coma and those who tended to him in what they thought were his last moments failed to detect a faint pulse. The stench could easily be attributed to a comatose man without a bedpan. There must be an explanation.

I am Thomas, the doubter, often put out of churches because I have trouble reciting creeds that other people write. I have trouble regurgitating spiritual truths I cannot confidently affirm. When Jesus tells a lame man to walk, I still want to know what ailed him. When he casts demons out of a patient, I want to know the biological agent that manifested the symptoms. When he heals a hemorrhaging woman I'm still searching for the causative agent that stemmed her bleeding. I have been put out of churches before because I refused to believe. I've been

called an apostate, I've been berated as one who rejects central teachings of the faith. I've been told that it's people like me who deny the Lordship of Christ.

How quickly people forget that Jesus did not put me out because of my reservations. He did not condemn me because I made him work harder to receive my belief. Oh, I'm sure that Jesus was frustrated by me. Always questions, always asking questions that he felt had answers that are obvious to those with faith. He tried to tell us that death was not to be feared – that he was going to prepare a place for us in his Maker's house. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," he told us. "If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." But I always took his flowery words as I take the words of all poets. Expressing truths, not facts. I took his words as reassurance not as the description of some alternate plane of being with its own zip code. "You know the way to the place to where I am going," he told us. And I was the only one who dared to challenge him: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

On the night several days after his death, when my friends claimed that he came to see them, I was not with them. You see, I'm a bit of a loner. Always have been. When some are troubled, they want to be around other people. Not I. I need my space. Space to think things through, to mull things over. Space to allow my thoughts to roll up on the shore like waves that cannot be stopped even if you want them to. I needed space that night because I knew that those thoughts were crashing too fast to make any sense to anyone else, much less to myself. I needed space because others would need to talk and I wouldn't have the mental space to listen. So I walked for a long time. I walked the streets and I thought about the time we had spent together. I thought about the words he had spoken to me.

I had told him that I did not understand, that I did not know where he was going. And so I did not know how we could find the way. And he told me that he was the way; he was the truth; he was the life. I understand now that he was asking me to trust him even when we did not believe, even when we did not understand. To follow him, even when we questioned whether or not we should. He was asking a skeptic like me not to shelve my questions, or my skepticism, or my critical mind, but to follow him anyway, knowing there must be some things in this world I will never understand. There must be some choices I can never understand. If we wait until we understand to love like he loved, to live like he lived, well then we'll never. . .

I kept walking, and the thought occurred to me that he would have known that I would be out here, feet to the pavement, trying to analyze, trying to diagnose, trying to figure out myself. He would have laughed that the one who knows better than anyone that a doctor shouldn't try to diagnose herself, that a scientist cannot carry out an unbiased observation if she is the subject of the search was out here attempting exactly that.

Questions unanswered, I headed back to where my friends were staying that night, with the relief that comes from accepting that one foot in front of the other is sometimes enough of an answer to the prayer of a skeptic. Opening the door they pulled me inside with urgent and hushed shouts, and eyes wide, and ten voices talking all at once. "We have seen the Lord," they

said to me excitedly, telling how he had appeared to them and breathed on them and shown them his wounded hands and side.

“Confused by grief,” I thought. “Wishful thinking.” It’s not unusual for grieving people to talk themselves into a reality that doesn’t exist. How could I blame any of us for deceiving ourselves into believing when we had suffered a loss that was inconceivable? I considered holding my tongue because to question their experience would be to hurt them, to say that I still could not trust the testimony of ten of my closest friends – my family. But, you see, skeptics like me never trust the testimony of the crowd when their testimony does not fit into our world of explanation. Generations may testify to the truth of what they have seen, but a skeptic knows that generations have been wrong before.

And so I told my friends I could not believe their testimony. I told them to their faces because I loved them and one does not withhold himself from the people he loves. I told them expecting that they would put me out. Expecting that they would judge me saying, “Thomas, why do you not believe us? You are alone in your unbelief.” It would not have been the first time this loner had taken a path that diverged into solitude.

The most remarkable thing – they did not put me out. Frustrated, yes. Ah, Thomas, you are impossible they said. Someone fix the meal. Someone pour me a glass of wine. Thomas you are as pig headed as anyone I know another said, but with love in his eyes. They didn’t put me out.

I stayed with them for a week – the doubter, the disbeliever. We ate together, we prayed together, we lived together for a week. The believing community did not put the doubter out.

And that, my friends is how I finally came to believe that Jesus’ vision did not die with him on that old rugged cross. That is how I came to trust that I could and I would follow Jesus’ way even though I never could fully understand it or accept it or explain it. That is how I came to trust that if I simply followed where I thought he was leading me even though I continued to question that very way, he would never lead me astray.

Because, you see, the other disciples – my friends – his followers - did not put the doubter out of the house. They had received his power to receive, his power to welcome, his power to create community where everyone else saw division. They had received his extraordinary self-giving Spirit. I knew in some unexplainable way, that he was still alive.

At the end of the week, he came to me – Jesus. I think it was him. I believe it was him. I put my finger in the wounds of hands. I felt that awful gash in his side where the spear had torn his flesh. I do believe in things I do not understand. But as incredible as that night was, it was my friends, his disciples, who taught me something much more miraculous, much more important. They didn’t worry about purity of belief. They didn’t obsess over my unbelief. They didn’t take it as their responsibility to convert me to their way of believing. They knew that if our Lord was raised he would find me soon enough. If God could walk through walls there was no reason for them to erect new ones. No. Their job was to love other people just as deeply as Jesus had loved us. To love other people regardless of belief. God will do the rest.

I am Thomas the doubter. I am sure that God loves me that way.