



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Desirability of Doubt

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 11, 2021
The Second Sunday of Easter
Based on John 20:19-31*

Let us pray: "Come, Creator Spirit, visit the minds you have made; fill the hearts you have created with heavenly gratitude." Amen.

We have come to know Thomas, the apostle from today's gospel reading, as "Doubting Thomas." After the disciples reported to him that they had been in the company of the resurrected Christ, Thomas firmly declares, "Unless I see... and touch... and place my hands... I will not believe." All he did was voice a reasonable and rational response to an unreasonable, illogical and seemingly absurd piece of information. Who could blame him?

Prior to these events, all of the disciples witnessed Jesus' earthly ministry, and the miracles he performed; they heard the words of prophecy he fulfilled, and even heard him predict his own death. On Good Friday they were informed about his torture and crucifixion; they knew he was dead.

But, although Jesus had spoken to them about his resurrection, they, too, balked at the notion of it.

This is not the only time we meet Thomas in John's Gospel; there are two other instances. The first was when Jesus was on his way to raise Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, from the dead. As Jesus heads towards Judea and the tomb of Lazarus, Thomas boldly declares to the band of disciples, "Let us also go with him so that we may die with him." Thomas was willing to follow Jesus back to Judea, a place where only days before people had tried to stone Jesus to death.

The second time we meet Thomas is when Jesus is teaching about his own resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "You know the way to where I am going." Thomas replies, "Lord, we do *not* know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

In each of these instances Thomas is, unflinchingly, the pragmatic one, the realist. "Of course, wherever you go Lord, I will go—it's you!" And then, "If we don't know where you are going, Lord, we can't possibly know the way. If I don't have the address, I can't meet you there." The spirit of boldness and confidence that we hear in Thomas' declarations in today's gospel is in keeping with the tone of these earlier instances. Today's story about Thomas speaks to his strong character and the sort of person and disciple he must have been. Yet, we know him only as "Doubting Thomas," as if somehow he is *lacking* in his faith because of his questions.

To doubt is to leave yourself open to seeking; to possess a heart of exploration. To doubt is to ask questions and to admit to the possibility that there is more to learn. It is to confess that you don't have all

the answers and that you may not even be sure that there *is* an answer. To have doubt is to be honest about the state of the world and the state of your heart; there is no shame in that. Christian theologian Paul Tillich puts it this way, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith."¹

Author Anne Lamott builds upon Tillich's quote when she writes, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. 'Certainty' is missing the point entirely. 'Faith' includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."²

Biblical scholar Peter Enns in his book *The Sin of Certainty* wrote, "A God who can be comfortably captured in our minds, with little else for us to find out, apart from an occasional adjustment, is no God at all. Expecting God to be rational is often more the problem than the solution... I find it strangely comforting that walking the path of Christian faith means being confronted moment by moment with what is counterintuitive and ultimately beyond my comprehension to understand or articulate. In an unexpected way, God [then] becomes more real to me, not less."³

Thomas shows us that faith is something that you put into practice. In his reaching out to touch Jesus' wounds, Thomas participates in an act of faith. In the Gospel of John the word "faith" or "belief" is never referred to as a noun. It is always as a verb. It is always an action.

Jesus' words to Thomas, "Do not doubt but believe," are more nuanced in the New Testament Greek translation. Jesus' words to Thomas in that translation are delivered as "Be you *becoming* believing!" It is an awkward translation to our ears, but the meaning implied is that faith and belief reside in a transformative process; that there is an unfolding, an evolving. It points to a faith that is continually becoming.

Faith is engagement in the life of the Holy Spirit; it's not merely something that we have, but something in us that blossoms. If we can begin with the open-heartedness generated by doubt, we are then positioned to move forward in faith. Faith is in motion and alive, causing us to continually reorient ourselves over and over again towards God's love, God's justice, God's mercy, and God's joy. Faith is showing up and trusting that God is there to be found in the midst of that which is good in your life and also in the midst of that which is grievous in your life. Faith beckons; it is an invitation. And we respond.

Spanish novelist and essayist Miguel de Unamuno wrote, "Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish in mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God idea, not God [as a Person]."⁴

Jesus was inviting Thomas to believe not just in the *idea* of a resurrected Messiah, but in Jesus *himself*—a Jesus full of unlimited possibilities: resurrected and real, powerful and alive, risen to a new life that had never existed before. The resurrection accomplished a new reality, a reality that transcends our limited pragmatic thinking and opened up whole new vistas and grander visions. He invited Thomas to rise from his fears in order to greet his Messiah. It is as if Jesus were asking, "Will you, Thomas, rise to greet each day in the spirit of the tomb or in the spirit of the resurrection?" That same question echoes in our ears.

This past year, the stress, the isolation and loss that the pandemic brought into our lives tempted us to meet our days in the spirit of the tomb instead of in the spirit of the resurrection. But even though we're still walking this difficult path, it doesn't mean that *God* doesn't know the way through.

Just because we can't see clearly to the next corner or over the next hill, doesn't mean that God can't do that. Just because we may not have enough insight to discern how to take the next steps required of us, doesn't mean that God's vision for us is impaired.

We travel on in this journey, all of us together in faith, and doubt gives us a valuable and necessary kick in the butt. Faith and doubt work symbiotically: doubt keeps us open and engaged, so that faith can have room to stretch and grow and become.

Thomas finally receives what the other disciples received: a personal encounter with the living Jesus. It makes a difference to him, and it makes a difference to the other disciples.

All of the disciples eventually put their faith in action; they unbolt the locked door, and go out into the world sharing the Good News that Jesus has risen from the grave and that the powers of death and darkness are ultimately defeated. We, too, are called to get out of our armchairs, unbolt our doors and live lives that reflect this amazing Good News.

Amen.

References:

1. *Dynamics of Faith*, by Paul Tillich, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 26.
2. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, by Anne Lamott, Thorndike Press, 2005, p. 257.
3. *The Sin of Certainty*, by Peter Enns, Harper Collins, 2016, pp. 151-152.
4. Miguel de Unamuno quote taken from *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, by Madeleine L'Engle, Convergent Books, 2016, pp. 23-24.

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