

John 20

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.’²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with **you**. As the Father has sent me, so I send **you**.’²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin^{*}), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ 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.’

I Doubt It

I was home in Iowa over the summer, and attended the Congregational ministers' coffee klatch at Panera. Bruce Fischer, 40 years removed from the United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities, immediately asked me whether my beliefs and assumptions had been completely shattered in seminary, as his had been. I admitted that there were moments in my first year when I thought that I would become convinced that scripture was too unreliable to trust completely and become Unitarian, or that our New Testament relied too much upon hearsay and novel theology and become an Orthodox Jew. And, laughing as I thought about those choices, I saw that Bruce

was not alone. In the watchful eyes of Bill Lovin, a quarter-century removed from here at Harvard, and Russ Fate, with his University of Chicago MDiv sixty years behind him, I saw the same question. And so then I thought about Thomas. Because if anyone in the New Testament had their assumptions and beliefs shattered, it was Thomas.

Now, we all know how this story ends. Jesus comes back. Thomas gets to root about in his wounds and convince himself of Jesus's authenticity. And, for this effort, he is quietly rebuked by Jesus while we are told that those who do not see and yet believe are blessed.

But what has always interested me is that we don't talk about what comes before. These twelve gave up their lives to follow an inspirational leader. They came to believe that he was, in fact, the incarnate God living on earth. And then, with little warning, he was suddenly gone. They saw him crucified, with nails in his hands, a spear in his side, and his life spilled out into the world. This man, who they had dropped everything to follow, was gone. After this shock, the brutal realities of being his followers quickly set in, and they were forced to lock themselves in a house against a ravaging mob looking to enforce its orthodoxy upon them. Can there be any doubt that these disciples were confused, hurt, and questioning? They had seen the miracles that convinced them Jesus was the incarnate Lord, and then he was killed by **human** hands. What did it all mean?

But we do not **see** their doubts. Instead, while Thomas is off on what can only be some community errand, Jesus comes back and shows them that he has risen, and then explains for them the reality of his death. Their hurt was removed by this reassuring sight, their confusion

blown away with his gift of the Holy Spirit. But Thomas did not get that opportunity. And so we see the remnants of their pain in his doubts.

What a human response of resentment and frustration he has to the joy of his friends. "Jesus came back, did he? I'll believe it when I can put my fingers in his wounds." On top of the loss and betrayal they all must have felt at Jesus's passing, onto Thomas is heaped the additional indignity of either being lied to by the others or of being purposely excluded by Jesus. After all that, can we blame him for wanting an opportunity to work through the great mystery of our faith himself?

So we are left in this story with two kinds of doubt. The very private doubts of Peter and Philip and James and John, who escape from the Jesus event with reputations intact, and the all-too-public Doubting Thomas. Now, we know here on Francis Avenue that Thomas has gotten a bad rap, because to our ears the message is clear. Thomas doubted so that those who came after the initial disciples could understand that they do not need to see in order to believe. Because Thomas struggled and doubted and got the chance to do his bloody fact-finding, we understand that Jesus's pre-parousia appearances have passed, and so we will need to believe in the absence of physical proof. But what are we to do with the hidden doubts of the other disciples, which we, too, may secretly share? They were saved for posterity by Jesus's return, but we will not be. As ministers, we will face the very real possibility of suffering Thomas's bad publicity if we proclaim our deepest doubts publicly. While we serve our congregations, we will need to be the successors to Peter and Paul, James and John, succoring our worshippers with the truths that we find in scripture and in the Christian life. So how are we to ensure that, after we have affirmed

our desire to profess Christ's word to those who will listen, **we** do not let those private doubts become too much to bear?

The answer comes in the promise of Thomas. Just like him, we have walked away from our past lives, and come from all over the country and the world here, to Harvard Divinity School. And here we find that the things we thought were true are not as certain as we were led to believe. Unitarians join the UCC. Evangelicals become Episcopalian. Fundamentalists walk away from their faith. And the most Liberal of Protestants connect with the object of their ultimate concern, proclaiming under Paul Tillich's broken cross that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again! You see it in the students who change between the MTS and the MDiv, and you see it on facebook, as one status update after another proclaims a crisis of faith. Marcus is wrestling with Paul. Shannon is questioning Job. Nathan has grave doubts about Philemon. And this is not new! As surely as we have been shocked and our long-held beliefs, liberal or conservative, have been assaulted, so too did Russ and Bruce and Bill, and perhaps Dudley and Kerry and Sam, Scott and Emily and Charles, Jeff and Elizabeth and maybe even, for one brief moment, Peter find confusion and doubt at their schools. And this doubt is not the elided doubt of James and John, it is the messy, gory, public doubt of Thomas. We proclaim it openly! And what a glorious opportunity it is that we have to doubt like Thomas did, so that we may comfort like Paul did! What is it that we do in Michael Coogan's class but to grasp the body of religious text and search it for its substance? When Helmut Koester demands that we cross out mistranslated words in our Bibles, are we doing any less than feeling through the holes in Christian teaching? And when we

listen to Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, we say, are those holes at all? Or are they the great silences of the women whose voices were not recorded in the scriptures?

And we have not just the brief time that Thomas had, but three long and yet swift years to express our human need to question and to be convinced. Not only can we doubt in public, examining the entrails of our faith for inspiration, but with the people God and the admissions committee have brought together here, we can debate the meaning of our doubts and our beliefs with others. All Thomases together, we can let the confusion and the uncertainty and the not knowing assault us so that we can, with the assurance that our faith has weathered the storm, bring our new convictions to our lifelong service, confidently proclaiming, "come along with me, I know a way forward".

And so it is with sorrow and surprise that I watch our attempts to gird ourselves against doubt, people walking out of classes that have offended our sensibilities and complaining about professors who will not accept our worldviews. When else in our lives will we have the opportunity to try on these new and different beliefs? When else will we be free of the pressure to be Paul and Peter to our fellows, carefully vetting the theology that we proclaim and being attuned to the dangers incumbent with certain verses? When else can we have the freedom and luxury of being Thomas, doubting our accumulated understandings and feeling out the path that God is calling upon us to take? Were Thomas here with us now, he would attend every class he could trying to understand what it was that he had seen and observed. He was confused. He didn't know what it all meant, any more than we do. **AND HE WAS THERE!** When people told him that his questions had been answered, he demanded more examination. But for him, debate

was cut off. We will not have his chance to put our hands in Christ's physical body. But we do have the opportunity that Thomas was denied, to work through what it all means for ourselves, so that we can be true and effective ministers of the Christian faith. We will have our whole lives to confidently show off our certainties. But this is our great chance to examine our dogma from different angles, so that our faith can persist in our time ahead as we take up the burden of discipleship. Like Thomas, let us Doubt now, so that they that follow us might believe.

Let us never forget the coda to the story of Thomas. When Portuguese explorers and traders landed in India in the 1530s, they were surprised to find a body of native Christians, forgotten by the eastern and western churches. Someone, it seems, had gone to them with the Word and convinced them some hundreds of years before. When asked who it was that had brought Christianity, the response was "We are Thomasite Christians." Now, I would need some evidence to believe that. But just think what it means, if true. This character who has been mocked and derided through history for his doubts had faith and understanding enough to found an outpost that survived without contact with the rest of the Christian Diaspora or institutional church for a thousand years. To that I say, let us doubt, that they may believe. Just like Thomas.