

I'd like to start out this morning by sharing a poem by the writer and theologian Norman Shirk that has had great meaning for me on this topic:

“DOUBT

*Let me meet you on the mountain, Lord,
Just once.
You wouldn't have to burn a whole bush.
Just a few smoking branches
And I would surely be ...your Moses.*

*Let me meet you on the water, Lord,
Just once.
It wouldn't have to be on the Lake.
Just on a puddle after the annual rain
And I would surely be...your Peter.*

*Let me meet you on the road, Lord,
Just once.
You wouldn't have to blind me on North Central Expressway.
Just a few bright lights on the way to chapel
And I would surely be...your Paul.*

*Let me meet you, Lord,
Just once.
Anywhere. Anytime.
Just meeting you in the Word is so hard sometimes
Must I always be...your Thomas?”*

(Let us Pray)

I once heard a pastor say that “Those who call their faith into question may be ahead of those who never doubt. Those who never doubt, never question, are stuck where they are. The ability to doubt and question is what leads to new breakthroughs in mind and spirit and indicates a willingness to grow intellectually and spiritually. Through skepticism, we can be led to a deeper faith and a new encounter with Christ.”

A couple of thousand years ago, there was a man named Thomas. Very little is known about him, except that one day he met a man named Jesus and he followed

Him. He appears by all accounts to have been a very brave man. He left his family, his home, his livelihood, and followed a total stranger. At one point in the stories, all his friends become afraid, because they realize this Jesus is going to get them all killed. Thomas is the one who says, "Let us go and die with Him." The faith of Thomas is a witness to us. Oh, to have the faith of Thomas.

But that's not the story Thomas is best known for....that's not the story we have in front of us this morning. No, in the story we have in front of us today, His friend, his Teacher, is dead; He's been killed by the government days ago, and now all Thomas's friends claim to have seen Jesus alive. This is the story of Thomas's doubt. The story of his courage. The story of his brutal, heartbreaking honesty. The story of a man who would not sing of love unless he was sure it existed.

Have you ever had a nickname....maybe sometime in Middle school or High School?

Maybe someone affectionately called you something...and maybe it even stuck with you into adulthood.

Or maybe the nickname was not so complimentary...sometimes nicknames can embellish an unkind feature in your life.... A feature maybe you would hope people overlook...but instead they seem to zero in on it and it becomes embellished and memorialized in a nickname.

That's what has happened to Thomas...or Doubting Thomas as we all know him today...

But the reality is that doubt is a theme that is found all over the Bible...Both in the New and Old Testaments.

Some believe that part of living out a strong faith goes hand in hand with eliminating doubt....But I would like to suggest that the objective for us shouldn't be to eliminate all doubt, but to redefine how we understand it.

In the Old Testament, When the Jews questioned God's presence or God's faithfulness, they weren't giving up on their faith. In fact, they took all their questions and addressed them directly to God as an act of faith. They hurled their doubts to the heavens. The psalms of lament are filled with this kind of faith. Even Jesus, when he felt abandoned by God on the cross, uttered the opening line of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is what it means to keep faith in our doubts.

And to his credit, even Thomas managed to keep a measure of faith even in the midst of his doubts. Notice this: Eight days after his confession of disbelief in the risen Christ, where was Thomas? He was still with the disciples. His doubts had not driven him away from the community and the community had not driven him away because of his doubts.

Thomas was still there--doubts and all--in the community--when Christ appeared again. And that's where we belong--in the church--with our doubts--so that we can learn together how to keep faith in our doubts.

I would like to suggest something to you this morning...I would like to suggest that Our friend Thomas has got a bad rap. Doubting Thomas, that's what he's called. Never mind that that's not what the disciples ever called him, or what Jesus ever called him. Actually, they called him "the twin"; that's what Thomas meant in their language. Yet we're never told that he had a brother or a sister... Some people believe that they may have called him "the twin" because he looked a lot like Jesus... Maybe they were teasing him for looking like their teacher. Maybe they were teasing him for acting so much like their teacher.

In any case, there doesn't seem to be any evidence that the disciples allowed Thomas's doubt to define him.

Thomas gets 4 total speaking parts, all in the gospel of John. The first is the one I already told you about, when he says with great courage and conviction to his friends, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." No sign of doubt there!

The second comes after Jesus's statement that He is going before us to prepare a place for us, and that we will follow. Thomas pipes up and says what probably everyone else was thinking, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Let me pause to ask you something: is this doubt? Or is this a question? If you ask me, it's not doubt. Thomas doesn't ask if that's possible, or if Jesus can be trusted. Like Mary before him, he simply asks how. How can this be for I have no husband? How can we follow you? We want to we believe that we can, and we believe that we will, I'm just wondering how.

The last two times Thomas speaks are in the section we had read for us this morning. "Unless I see the nail marks... I will not believe." And what does Jesus do in response to this doubt? He extends His hands and invites Thomas to place his hand in the wound in His side, and Thomas exclaims, in the powerful last line we get from him, "My Lord and my God!"

It's very important, this statement of Thomas's: at first he calls Jesus his Lord, which isn't very descriptive. Lord could be simply the title of a man of higher social status. Lord could be just another way of showing respect to a teacher. Lord could mean master, nothing more. But then Thomas calls Jesus, "God."

Thomas was a Jew, and for a Jew the belief in one and only one God is as essential as breathing. You don't just go around calling anyone a god. That's pretty much the gist of commandments 1 through 3. To say these words could easily have gotten Thomas killed. To say these words could have gotten him considered damned by everyone he knew, his father and mother, his old friends, his old rabbi and everyone in his town.

But he says it anyway, because Thomas, I want to suggest, was not a doubter— or at least not for long. Thomas, ultimately, was very brave, and very faithful.

Did you know that there is a miracle in this story...a miracle beside the fact that the risen Christ is speaking with the disciples.....The other miracle of Thomas's story is that Jesus does not have an unkind word to say to him. Jesus comes to him and says, "Look, feel, see- I am alive." He does not mock him for his doubts, or make him say any hail Mary's or do any pushups. He answers him. Exactly what Thomas said he needed— to see the nail marks and put his hand in Jesus's side— is what Jesus offers him.

Judas didn't stick around to ask for what he needed. For whatever reason— fear, or embarrassment, or bitterness that he couldn't believe what all the other disciples seemed to believe so easily— he couldn't be that honest with his friends, and he looked for the easy way out— just to get Jesus out of the picture.

Thomas, though, he was not afraid to speak his truth: "I am having trouble believing this stuff. I didn't see it with my own eyes, and I don't think I'll be able to believe until I do."

Honest Thomas. Oh, to have the authenticity of Thomas!

Here's what it seems to me we can learn from Thomas: When his faith began to crumble, when he could no longer feel God walking beside him, or hear God speaking to him, he did not run. He did not leave. He did not take the easy way out and just go back home where it was comfortable and safe. The story finds him in the room with the disciples. He says, "I don't believe right now," and yet he stays.

And not only does he stay, he asks his brothers for exactly what he needs: "I need to see the wounds, to put my hands in them." And I think it's because of the faith it took to stay and the courage it took to be that honest that he was given what he asked for— Jesus's wounded hands and feet and side.

Friends, if you have come here this morning with doubts, you are in good company. Thomas stands with you, because he has been there.

Dr. Brené Brown who is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and who has spent the past thirteen years studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame says "that faith without vulnerability and mystery is not faith at all. Faith is a risk, a risk that takes honesty and courage."

This is the kind of faith that Thomas had. A risk that takes fear and trembling, like Thomas had. A risk that takes everything you have, like Thomas gave. This church stands here so that we can have a place where all are welcome to get honest with God. A place where we can come with the doubts...and experience the faith in the midst of those doubts with a community that embraces the ideals of open hearts, open minds and open doors.

If you have come here in doubt and fear, know that we stand with you and pray for you, because everyone here has been there. If you are looking at the communion meal that is set for us this morning with trepidation, just know this: Jesus invites to the table everyone who earnestly seeks Him. Just as he invited the doubter Thomas to put his hand in His side, Jesus invites the doubters in this room, including you, including me, to put our hands on this broken body and, by it and believe.

May we wrestle with doubt that leads to a deeper relationship with God and that teaches us to trust?

May we have the confidence that the gifts God has given us are more than enough... May we learn to Deal with Doubt. Amen and Amen.