

19 April 2020
John 20:19-31
The Doubt of Thomas
First Mennonite Church

I've heard many sermons in my life. I've even preached some of them. But when I think back to the ones that really influenced, moved, and impacted me, then the list of memorable sermons gets much shorter. I remember one particular sermon when I was a teenager. My youth pastor, Peter P, preached on John 20:19-31. His sermon



The Doubt of St. Thomas by Chinese artist, He Qi (2001)

title was **Doubting Thomas**. I don't remember much of what he said that morning, but I took away one nugget. And the nugget was in the form of a challenge. He challenged the congregation to question what they believed, and not just simply to give their sleepy nod to whatever they read or heard. The Church, he said, was a place for thinking about what we believe and why.

On the one hand, I'm surprised that I remember that challenging nugget, because sermons don't usually come with a guarantee. Someone once joked a person's ability to remember a sermon was guaranteed for 50 metres or 50 seconds, whatever came first!

Yet, on the other hand, I'm not surprised that I remember, because when I was a teenager, I had a lot of questions about my SS faith which needed answers. Why was faith important? Why should I believe in God? The sermon that particular Sunday seemed directed at me.

No doubt, it was that experience which forever endured me to Thomas. I like Thomas even though he gets a bad rap in Church history for his doubts. When the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord, Thomas scoffed,
'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.'

Thomas doubted, didn't just believe what the other disciples told him. The doubting Thomas label stuck even though earlier in John's Gospel, Thomas demonstrated his devotion to Jesus by insisting that the disciples accompany Jesus to Bethany, a place he'd had to leave under threat of being stoned. Thomas supported Jesus' plan by saying, *"Let us also go that we may die with him."*

The doubting Thomas label stuck even though Thomas showed himself to be theologically astute. In the midst of Jesus' long farewell discourse in John 14 when Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places . . . where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going", Thomas asks "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

The doubting Thomas label stuck even though Thomas gave one of the most moving confessions of faith in John's gospel. After Jesus invited him to touch his wounds, Thomas says, *"My Lord and my God!"*

Even though Thomas had his moment of great devotion, shows himself to be theologically astute, and utters one of the most moving confessions of faith in the gospel, Thomas is best known for his doubt.

'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.'

Thomas doubted the resurrection of Jesus, and ever since the Church has reminded us that it's not a good idea to doubt. There are people who say, *"God gives us plenty of evidence to believe in him. Doubt comes when we fail to stop long enough to observe all the evidence."*

(Taken from HelpFinder Bible NLT: God's Word at Your Point of Need)

Well, yes and no.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, writer and theologian, Frederick Buechner, very eloquently said, **"If you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or**

asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

I love that image of ants in the pants! Have you ever had ants in your pants? Or a bug crawling down the back of your neck? As soon as I realized a 6-legged organism that has flourished for millions of years was climbing up my leg, I jumped up from what I was doing and started violently whacking away at the thing!

Having doubts is a lot like having ants in your pants. They can be uncomfortable. They certainly make you move, push you to find answers to new questions. Doubts can create tension within yourself or even within your relationships. But are these negative things?

A closer examination of this story and this Gospel suggests that Thomas isn't so different from the rest of the disciples. Here in John 20, we have three post-resurrection stories. On Easter Sunday, we read about the first resurrection story, where the Risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden.

In today's story, we have two similar accounts of Jesus' appearing to his disciples, only one of which occurred when Thomas was present. In today's first account, Jesus appeared to his frightened disciples and said, peace to you. After this, *“he showed them his hands and his side.”* It was only after this visual inspection that the disciples *“rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”*

Thomas wasn't at the first appearance, didn't experience what the other disciples experienced. In the second appearance Jesus invited Thomas to touch his hands and side, echoing Thomas's own words about not believing until he saw the *mark of the nails in his hands, and put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in his side*. Whether or not Thomas actually touched the wounds, he responded with a confession of faith, *“My Lord and my God!”*

It seems to me that Thomas **personifies the doubt that all the disciples experienced** upon hearing the first reports of Jesus being alive. And who can blame them? Would you expect someone you had buried a few short days ago to be standing before you, alive? Would you not doubt your sanity? Would you not question how such a thing is possible?

Matthew says that when the disciples met Jesus in Galilee, they worshipped him, **but some doubted** (Matthew 28:17). It wasn't just Thomas that doubted. Luke

said that the women's joyful announcement to the other disciples that Jesus was alive was met with disbelief, for it seemed to them "**an idle tale**" (Luke 24:11). Even after Jesus appeared to his disciples and showed them his hands and feet, they **disbelieved in their joy** (Luke. 24:41).

So, we shouldn't just slap the doubting label on Thomas, but should label all of the disciples that way. It's not just doubting Thomas, but doubting Matthew, doubting Andrew, doubting Bartholomew, and even doubting Peter. Everyone, including the disciples, found it difficult to wrap their head around the resurrection of Jesus.

If those first witnesses struggled to comprehend the resurrection, then why has the Church asked us not to doubt but believe? **One reason** is because people often become uncomfortable when others, especially children young people, ask tough questions of faith. How will I respond?! What if I don't have the answer?! I didn't learn that in SS! Besides there are those in the Church who don't want anyone to question Jesus or God or anything for even half a second.

The reason I remember Peter Penner's sermon from when I was a teenager, the reason I like Thomas was because I also had a lot of doubts about my SS faith and had questions that needed answers. If faith was important to my parents, should it be important to me? Why should I believe in God? Why is the message of the Bible important? These were my "ants in my pants", and they prompted me to search and study, at what was then called, Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC). My experience there led me to eventually become a pastor.

My questions about faith are not unusual. Belonging to Jesus doesn't shield any of us from the confusion, the complexity, the doubt, or ache of being human and living as a follower of Jesus. Too often, Christians, act as if faith should be straightforward and easy, and we're quick to judge those who question, those who seem "weak" in faith, those who are not overflowing with confident trust in God. All too often, we think of "strong" faith as being able to quote the Bible, or being absolutely sure about specific tenets of church doctrine, or enthusiastic conformity to particular aspects of church culture. Despite paying lip-service to grace, we sometimes tend to cast wary glances over to those who struggle to believe or who question specific theologies or practices. We tend not to appreciate doubters, those who question why things are the way they are.

I'm confident God is big enough to handle any of our doubts, fears, and questions.

A **second reason** why Christians have discouraged doubt is that we've forgotten what an incredible, unbelievable story the resurrection actually was! Last week I talked about how the church has **domesticated Easter** by using symbols and descriptions of springtime to speak about the resurrection. Using symbols of chicks bursting forth out of eggs, trees budding, flowers blooming has made the absolutely incredible and abnormal resurrection story part of the normal pattern of life—winter to spring, spring to summer—like the normal ebb and flow of the seasons.

But Easter is an event that goes against everything we know about life, which is, we are born, we live, and then we die. This is normal. We shouldn't be surprised Thomas doubted Jesus was alive because Thomas knew dead people stay dead. What's normal is that dead people DO NOT rise from the dead! Dead people aren't sleeping or in a state of suspended animation; they are dead. Their bodies decompose and are gone. In 1 Peter it says, *"All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls"* (1 Peter 1.24). That Thomas doubted was completely normal. Those first witnesses to the resurrection were all filled with fear, dread, and doubt.

So, what do we do with our ongoing doubts, our own ants in our pants? I suspect some of us have felt guilty for having doubts of faith. What's interesting is that Thomas isn't chided for doubting the resurrection. Whenever you are seriously and honestly engaged with the complexities of life and faith, you are bound to have ongoing questions and doubts. You will never quite feel that you've found what you're looking for because your life keeps moving forward and onward, and new experiences and questions are always in front of you. Rather than feeling guilty, I think a more fitting response is: **"Lord, I believe. Help me in my doubts!"**



Exactly what happened with Thomas we are not sure. Tradition says that the apostle Thomas went to India and established a church there. The St Thomas Church in southern India is considered to be the oldest church in India, with roots going back to the work of Thomas.

In addition to admitting our doubts, one step forward is actually dealing with them. Though the risen Christ challenges our most basic assumptions about life and death, faith and doubt, the risen Christ has also assured us of his ongoing presence and help, even in times of doubt.

When my oldest son was born prematurely—and for awhile it was looking like he may not survive—I had many, many questions about the goodness of God. I doubted God’s ability to help. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? These questions, along with many others, pushed me in different directions. I met new people who shared their stories of suffering, I read books about the suffering God, and experienced a Church that prayed on my behalf when I couldn’t pray. Surprisingly, I found God in all of my questions. Doubts pushed me to experience God in a new and profound ways. I not only experienced God in my suffering, but also began to see God’s incarnational presence in the suffering of the world.

Doubts can cause tension, create unease. And where there is tension and unease there is an opportunity for the risen Christ to appear. Christ was there so long ago. Christ is here. With us. Today. Even if we have to stay 2 metres apart. Thanks be to God. Amen.