

John 20:24 - 29

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

This is the word of God and it can be trusted.

Thanks be to God

A defendant was on trial for murder in Oklahoma. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse.

In the defense's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one

minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened.

Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I, therefore, put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty.

"But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door."

The jury foreman answered: "Oh, we did look. But your client didn't."

Let Us Pray

Dear Lord,

Thank you for giving us the freedom to ask the hard questions.

Help us with our doubts. Help us to be honest with ourselves so that we might know the source of our doubts. Lord, we are here because we believe. Even in our doubting we want to believe. Give us the courage to ask the right questions and more importantly to accept your answers, as disillusioning as they may be.

Lord, confront those smokescreens we put up because we don't really want to change.

Lord, give us each the courage to seek you in the sources you have already given us, your Word, the Bible.

Lord, help us also to lean on helpful experts who can lead us to some answers.

Lord, I ask you to dispel any casualness toward you. Give us a passion and a yearning and drive within us to seek you and find you and to draw nearer to you. We want to be "forceful men and women" who lay hold of your kingdom in all its fullness. Thank you for making your kingdom available to us through Jesus Christ.

It is in His Name, I pray. Amen.

Last week we read about Mary's encounter with the risen Christ. How she had confronted the *gardener* at the empty tomb concerning the whereabouts of Jesus' body. After a moment of discussion the *gardener* called Mary by name and she realized in that instance that it was her Jesus that stood before her. So why then did Peter and John, who had rushed so quickly to the tomb when Mary had told them it was empty, not equally so set out to find the risen Jesus when she shared with them her encounter with *gardener*? Why didn't they go looking for him? Why was an apparent grave robbery seemingly more intriguing to at least some of the Disciples than an apparent resurrection from the grave?

It is difficult to answer this question, but John gives us a major clue. Between the events at the tomb that first Easter morning and today's scripture reading we find the Disciples huddled together behind locked doors. The door was locked. Why would the Disciples be hidden away from the world behind locked doors? They were afraid.

They were afraid of the Jews, John said. But that doesn't seem a terribly credible fear. There was no evidence that anyone was planning to hunt down the followers of Jesus. If ever there were a location where they very well could have run into some Roman soldiers or Jewish leaders, the tomb was it. Yet still they had gone earlier that same day. Fear did not stop them when they thought a grave robbery had happened. So why did fear lock them up in a room when resurrection was in the air? Who were they really afraid of running into if they went out?

Could it have been that they were afraid of running into Jesus himself? Certainly at least Peter would have had reason to avert his eyes from the Lord in case he ran into him. The last time Peter had spoken to Jesus, his words had been full of confidence. But then some hours later a rooster crowed and Peter seriously considered following Judas down a path that had a noose at the end of it. It wasn't just Peter who had denied their Christ and fled, but all of the other disciples had fled Gethsemane; frightened like sheep in a storm.

Yet our scripture reading this morning tells us that Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. Where had he been? Possibly he was out looking for Jesus. John's gospel tells us that he was called Didymus or in some translations, *Twin* which implies a close relationship with Jesus.

Though not biologically the Jesus' twin, it is apparent that the two shared a common spirit, closer maybe it seems that did the other disciples with Christ. I have two brothers and two sisters and love them all unconditionally. If you have brothers and sisters of your own, then you must know what I mean. In addition, however, one of my brothers is also my twin. Though I love him as unconditionally as my other siblings, there is a special bond that we share. It's indescribable to anyone who does not have a twin of their own, but it binds us in a way that no other relationship can. I lost a sister a few years ago to a brain aneurism. It is hard to lose someone you love and you never fully recover from that loss, but eventually move on. However, if my twin were to leave me without notice, I believe I would feel that my own life had ended.

Thomas must have felt this same loss. Maybe he was not with the other Disciples because he still needed time to sort things out or maybe he was desperately trying to find the risen Christ. How disappointed and hurt he must have felt when he returned to the Disciples to learn that he had missed seeing his Lord. His doubt was not his downfall. It was reactive. Almost like that of a child that reacts to not getting his way. *If I can't share in the experience, then I will not accept that anyone has done so. I will not believe unless I see the marks of Jesus crucifixion in His hands and place my hand into His side.* A pretty tall order, I think.

But that is what doubt does to us. It causes us to question all that we know and believe. Sometimes our questions seem legitimate, but as legitimate as our requests and inquiries may seem we still find ourselves placing obstacles before ourselves that really do more to hinder our faith in the beginning. However, God has a plan. Though we may allow doubt to hinder our progress, God can and will use it to strengthen our faith. Jesus let Thomas wait eight days before he appeared to the

Disciples again and this time to Thomas, as well. For eight days Thomas was forced to explore his doubt, to hear from the other Disciples all that had occurred that day as Thomas was apart from them. Jesus could have appeared instantaneously during that first moment of Thomas doubt, but he did not. Jesus let that doubt work in Thomas and to strengthen all that Thomas had learned and saw during Christ time before His crucifixion.

You Know You Have Doubts when your prayer goes something like this: "O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul, so I can go to heaven, if there is a heaven." We laugh, but doubt is usually not a laughing matter. Dealing with doubt is difficult.

A missionary is forced to come home to treat his wife for cancer just when he was beginning to see people coming to know the Lord. He had to leave the work undone without any replacements. He says honestly, "God, that's stupid. That's dumb. That doesn't make sense. Why have you allowed this now?" Ever asked questions of God like this?

A Christian businessman is laid off only six months before retirement and the company he worked for somehow managed to finagle it so that he lost all his retirement benefits. He honestly expresses his anger to God, "God, that's not fair! I don't know if Christianity is worth it! How can you say you love me when you allow something bad like this to happen." Have you ever been there? Have you ever wondered if God really did care about you?

You watch a news documentary about the devastating drought in a third world country. There's a mother cradling her dead baby crying out in anguish. You can't understand her words, but you imagine she is saying something like, "God, why did you let my baby die. All we needed was a little rain? Why did you let my baby die?" You begin to wonder how a good God could do such a thing. Or fail to be moved to prevent it. Have you ever had these kinds of thoughts?

A man says, "I can't imagine a God who would put anyone in hell for eternity. I would never willingly torture anyone no matter how evil he was." You feel the weight of his words and begin to wonder about the doctrine of hell yourself.

Doubts; they can be nagging. They can be overwhelming. They can even devastate your faith. But as we saw in our reading today, Christ is faithful. He is faithful to be with us, to give us strength and to allow our doubts to work to our advantage, if only we continue to trust in Him. Even a believer of the status of Thomas, a Disciple who had walked with Jesus, one who had heard his teachings, witnessed the healing of the sick and even saw Lazarus raised from the dead; had doubts. He didn't runaway because of his doubt but rather he persevered.

At the end of the week, when Thomas was in the company of the disciples', Jesus appeared again to them. Immediately he went to his friend (his twin) Thomas, and asked him to touch him, doubt no more – and believe. Jesus did not reprimand Thomas for doubting nor did he ridicule him for reacting the way that he did to the news of His Resurrection. He simply met Thomas where he was.

The scriptures do not tell us if Thomas ever actually touched Christ. Perhaps he did, and maybe he didn't. The experience of having an encounter with Jesus after His Resurrection may have

been enough. Seeing the savior, hearing ones doubts articulated, and just being given the chance to act on them, may have been enough. In this act, Thomas, became the patron saint of all who wrestle with doubt or disbelief.

God created human beings as a blessing for the world. This is a piece of our theology that is very ancient. At least as old as our notions of original sin, but probably less well known. It is known as the doctrine of original blessing. "Creation, creator, Jesus, and we are all essentially good. This is true even in our human physical form. Our physical form is not something to be escaped, but something to be affirmed. We are not divine sparks trapped in fleshly corpses; we are truly human and truly good, made to be the way we are."

As a result of his perseverance, Thomas was blessed. Out of this experience, Jesus, being the great teacher that he is, teaches Thomas and the others another valuable lesson concerning his resurrection. Verse 29 states, "Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

God delights in our humanity, and through Jesus, the Son, delights in us – even when we stumble and question our existence, and our nature. God is there with us, even when we cannot see or feel God; God is there, beyond our senses. This is healing for us as the people of God, because we are then given to freedom and the potential to live out our lives to the borders of all that we know and even to step forward into the creation of a new relationship, a new work and a new decision in faith.

As we heard last week and hear again its echo in today's lectionary reading; each experience of our lives, however minuscule or profound, allows us the opportunity for a fresh new start; a new hope for a new day and new beginnings. Knowledge is important, but faith is what matters most. Hold on to faith when you doubt and when you believe. Trust that God is working through the certainly and the unanswered questions of your life.

AMEN.