

If you think back very far, you will recognize him as a favorite whipping boy. Over the generations, preachers have waxed long and they have waxed eloquent about his little faith. Known by the adjective usually associated with his name, Thomas—*Doubting* Thomas, that is—has been chastised through history as a failed disciple. When the chips were down and Jesus needed him, he had vacated the premises. Rather than welcoming news of a risen Christ with the hope and joy it deserved, he stood back, folded his arms and spit forth a challenge: “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.”

Strange, isn't it, that we condemn Thomas for asking for the same, the *very* same demonstration that had convinced his fellow disciples only a week before. As a matter of fact, if we look at the stories of Jesus' appearances following the resurrection closely, we will find doubt sprinkled liberally throughout them. Mary Magdalene, whom we visited standing alone outside the tomb last week, despaired that Jesus' body had been stolen and that despite the fact that she had encountered there *angels*, no less, who had told her he had been raised. The two disciples, Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (probably John), had come at her bidding, seen the empty tomb and in an anti-climactic moment, “returned to their homes.” And then all of the eleven, informed by Mary of her encounter of Jesus in the garden, had celebrated the good news? No. They had gathered Easter evening behind closed doors, “locked for fear” of the Jewish leaders who might target them as they had targeted Jesus. And a week later, where were they? They were, John tells us, again gathered behind “closed doors,” still fearful perhaps of venturing outside. Yet Jesus, coming into their midst a week earlier, had bid them peace in their turmoil and in an act reminiscent of Genesis had breathed God's Spirit upon them and commissioned them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” In all honesty, none of them seem to have gotten very far from the safety of their familiar space. Thomas, bless his heart, was asking for no more reassurance than that given the other ten disciples in his absence. He wanted to see and touch Jesus' wounds as his fellow disciples had seen and touched them. Yet, even having done so and having been convinced of Jesus' identity in the process, they hadn't gotten very far, had they?

So is that the answer? Instead of attacking poor Thomas alone, should we rather be sneering at all of the disciples and, clucking our tongues, dismiss them all as dismal failures? Or is the focus actually elsewhere? Is John actually concerned about a broader circle of believers than just those gathered those two Sunday evenings in the upper room? Notice that John includes no reprimand. Jesus chides neither Thomas nor the other disciples for their unbelief. Instead, he offers a blessing. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” John goes on: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

John's outlook was far reaching. The last of the four Gospels to be written, John's Gospel is dated 80 CE (considered early) or (more likely) as late as 90 or 95 CE, meaning that at minimum, it was written 50 or 60 or more years after Jesus' ministry. The equivalent of more than a generation removed from the events depicted, John (or more accurately, a possible disciple of the Apostle John, who had already died) was writing to those struggling for faith who had not had the opportunity to see and touch the living Christ. The generation that had been blessed to journey alongside Jesus during his lifetime and who became convinced after his death that he still lived, was gone. Only those “who have not seen and yet have come to believe” remained; and John (or again, a disciple, a learner from John's school of believers) was writing specifically for them so that despite their doubts, their struggle to believe, they might “come to believe” and “have life” in Jesus' name.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Despite the bad rap “Doubting” Thomas has received, doubt is not a bad word. It is not the opposite of faith nor contrary to faith. It rather accompanies faith and becomes the threshold through which faith walks in its effort to confront new challenges and situations. Despite its discomfort, if we confront it as friend rather than enemy, it can become the occasion for growth. Certitude, on the other hand, *is* the enemy of faith, even if it is the certitude of orthodoxy, of having all of our doctrinal *t*'s crossed and all of our *i*'s crossed. Certitude is about self-sufficiency, not humble confession. It is about pompous pride, no matter how much we mouth denials, not relationship. *If* we are honest (and it's good to be honest in church), the words of the anxious father in Mark's story seeking healing for his epileptic child

are a fitting prayer for all of us: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24).

We are, after all, in the same boat as those to whom John was writing. We and generations upon generations of believers who have gone before us did not have the privilege of walking alongside Jesus. We did not have the opportunity to see and touch him in his physical life nor were we there to experience his resurrection firsthand. Although some acclaim and follow Jesus in appreciation for his admirable teachings and exemplary, compassionate way of life, the Christian faith is a resurrection faith. “Without Easter,” Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan insist, “we wouldn’t know about Jesus”. He would have been just “another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed thousands of such executions” [*Last Week*, 190]. Sure, they acknowledge, there may have been a trace or two of his existence preserved in a few first century writings; but “without Easter we wouldn’t even have ‘Good Friday,’ for there would have been no abiding community to remember and give meaning to his death.”

Notice the key words: “abiding community” and “to remember and give meaning.” Borg and Crossan have spent a lifetime in searching out in all honesty the historicity of the stories about Jesus. Assessing the stories one-by-one and the varying evidence of whether each did indeed occur, Borg and Crossan come down to affirming the historical, investigative process, but also the significance of the stories as “parable.” Speaking of the stories of Jesus as parable does not involve a denial of their factuality. It is happy with leaving the question open and again, to assess them one-by-one. Parables, they insist, “can be true—truthful and truth-filled—independent of their factuality” [193]. Asking “Did it happen?” is okay, but it should not be the end of the matter for believers or for those who have difficulty with belief. The importance of the stories “lies in their meanings.” We are not finished until we get to what they mean.

What, then, is the meaning (or more appropriately, meanings) of the story of Thomas?

Faith celebrates the God who comes again and again. Again, take notice that the story does not include a reprimand. Thomas is not put down for his questions, and by implication, neither are those who will follow him in succeeding generations. Rather, John and the other three Gospels, go to great lengths to illustrate the lengths to which Jesus goes in meeting each person struggling for belief right where they are. The significance of Thomas’ struggle seems to reside especially at the point that it seems to have been the last story John relates. (Chapter 21 seems to have been added later by another writer). John’s conclusion directed at those who have not seen and touched Jesus seems to be caught up in the conclusion to his Gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe.”

That Jesus returns to the upper room a second time where he not only welcomes Thomas’ need to see and touch him but also pronounces blessing upon those of future generations who have not seen but have come to believe breathes promise and hope for all who have the courage to struggle for faith even to this day. Faith is about that ongoing struggle to believe—to meet doubts and questions and new circumstances head-on and to prayerfully and with perseverance find our way through. We all have times when, frankly, we tire of the struggle and are tempted either to throw faith out the window or to lock the doors of our lives and settle for what we have always believed or what someone has told us we must believe. The mark of a healthy faith, however, is not that it is frozen in place, safely orthodox, or hiding behind defensive walls. A healthy faith bids us toward an uncertain future, confident that the Christ who has bid us there walks with us still.

Jesus came back to his first disciples in the midst of their fear, pain, doubt and confusion, John tells us; and he also comes back to us. He comes bearing peace and speaking into our anxious lives the breath of God’s Spirit. What is more, Lutheran Professor Elizabeth Johnson suggests, he keeps showing up. Just as he came back for Thomas, he keeps coming back week after week, year after year, generation after generation among his gathered disciples. He comes in the word, the water, the bread and the cup, not wanting any to miss out on the life and peace he bestows. “And he keeps sending us out of our safe, locked rooms into a world that, like us, so desperately needs his gifts of life and peace” [*workingpreacher.com*, April 27, 2015].

That has been my experience. What about yours?