

# “Not Only Thomas Had His Doubts”

(a sermon based upon John 20:19-31, page 115 in the New Testament)

by

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It may be hard for us to appreciate Thomas's continued "doubting" the reality of the Easter event the others *told him* about more than a week later.

For "Easter people" like us, who only know Jesus from the *resurrection*-side of the story – for whom Jesus has *always been "the Risen Christ"* – it may seem unnecessary to go back in our imagination and consider the *fears & doubts* of those early disciples. As in our Opening Song, we can say: "*Every day is resurrection day. The past is over and gone!*" The fact is, we Christians live in the aftermath of Easter. We know the happy ending to the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

And we believe it, *don't we?*

For those of us who know *the Rhythm of Life is a powerful beat* – who trust that God has the power to bring about *new* beginnings, surprising though they may be, *up from the ashes* of utter disaster – it may be hard for us to go back and imagine the feelings of *disbelief*, abandonment, misunderstandings, and *fears* of those first disciples.

After all, *we* don't have any *doubts* about the resurrection of Jesus, *do we?*

Of course, I'm kidding. We *all* have our doubts. Still, it may be hard for us to get "inside" the heads of those fearful disciples, so long ago and so far away, unless... we have had a similar *personal* confrontation with the *pain* of tragic loss (an experience of unfair injustice) as was the execution of Jesus.

In the story we heard this morning, we met people who were *blinded by grief*. Some of them were in *denial*. Some, probably, were still at the stage we call "*bargaining*" -- wanting to *make a deal with God* so that things could go back to the way they were *before* the violence, before the death of their loved

one. Some, most certainly, were angry! All of them were *hurting*.

When we think of Thomas, who *refused* to believe that Jesus Christ had risen without having the *physical evidence* of *touching* Jesus' *resurrected body* himself, we shake our heads: “*Thomas, Thomas, Thomas, why are you so slow to believe?*” Like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus that we met two weeks ago, Thomas is still *processing* his *grief* over Jesus’ death.

I can only imagine how deeply *those same feelings* run today in the family of that little 11-year-old girl in Cleveland, *shot to death* by her 10-year old brother last week, when he was handing the loaded pistol over to his 14-year old brother, who had brought it into their home. The police arrested the 14-year old for having the gun in the first place – holding *him* responsible for the sad tragedy, not the 10-year old shooter – but there is no way to *arrest* the *grief* that whole family is going through right now. Their younger son a killer, their older one now in jail, & their daughter gone forever. *Unfair*, unjust, incomprehensible!

I can imagine all the disciples in that first Eastertide going through just such a period of tragic mourning and grief. Thomas probably *wanted* to believe, but he was stymied by lack of proof.

It is very likely that Thomas was also feeling *hurt* and angry that the *others* had seen Jesus a week earlier, but he had been *left out!* It is possible that the experience the others had in that locked room on that first Easter night – when Jesus breathed on them the Holy Spirit – might have been the *only* time the Risen Christ would *ever* appear (and he *missed* it!). Remember: Thomas is in *grief*.

The events of Easter as recorded in the Gospels give us a picture of a broken-hearted, confused, betrayed community. Not only had these disciples let Jesus down, *Jesus* had let *them* down! How could the Messiah let himself be *arrested!?* How is it possible that Jesus had been *tried* (condemned, crucified!) without *resisting* his fate -- without calling down angels to his aid!?! His followers felt betrayed, angry, *lost without him*. No wonder they locked the doors!

John writes that the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked “for fear of the Jews.” In the sermon that *Steve Sterner’s Pastor*

preached last Sunday in Cleveland, she reminded us that this text is one of many in John's Gospel that has been used through the ages to heap **blame and abuse** upon "the Jews."

Those chief priests & elders of the people -- those religious and civic leaders in Jerusalem -- who had **hounded** Jesus, were assumed to be threatening, looking to exterminate his followers. Animosity toward "the Jews" is part of John's agenda, unfortunately.

Then she reminded us that **all the people** in that room were Jews! Jesus was a Jew. Peter was a Jew. Thomas was a Jew! It was their **own fears** – in them! – that had them lock their doors, not necessarily any threat from the outside. It was their own **inner** pain, guilt, doubt, fear, & anger that held them.

Down deep inside, they were hurting! Their friend (their partner, their Lord) had **died** on them. The one in whom their lives had found its deepest meaning... who had vowed **never to leave** them... who had said that he **loved** them... who had come that their joy might be full and their lives "abundant"... The one who had **led** them, and laid down his **life** for them... had up and **died** on them! *Isn't it enough to bring tears to your eyes?*

These disciples, and Thomas himself, all knew Jesus -- first hand, better than you or I will ever know him. But in their **grief**, renewed **faith** came hard! How much harder then for those of *us* who have **never seen him**, who must **trust** the **stories** that **others** have told. When Thomas acknowledges Jesus with the words: "*My Lord and my God!*", Jesus said to him:

***"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*** (John 20:29)

If we are to believe, it is because we **trust** the **stories** that **others** have told. The Gospel writer concludes with these words:

***"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 20:30-31)

As I said, I believe the disciples had *faith in Jesus* -- but, in their grief, their *faith* alternated with *fear*. Fear of death, of course, that's the big one. That's what Easter confronts full on! But there was also the fear of how they would continue to *live* without Jesus, their leader, their loved one. You see, *they* had survived! *Jesus* had died! *It's the survivors who feel grief*. Confronting human mortality is a fearful thing! (We don't do it gladly.)

Even when you have faith in Christ -- even when you trust in Jesus (as they all did) -- *the death of a loved one* is a tremendous burden. And we always feel like we're the first one to feel this *crashing, crushing*, hellish emptiness. We take it *so* personally!

But grief is a burden that has been felt by all the generations which have *preceded us*, and it has been felt right here among the loved ones of this congregation. (Just think of Dave Cole, Warren & Jean VanderLeest, Ethel Tibbitt & Grandpa Paul Jr & Paul III, Grandma Dorothy & Norma Thompson, Ulla's son Clark and her husband Ted, Rose Gil, Edna Klopfenstein, Gabrielle Eyestone, Jean Walker whose memorial donations were set aside to repaint this sanctuary, LueVara & Jack Allen and their son Bart, Mary Specht who was on the search committee that called me here 14 years ago, Catherine Wyss, Merle Love, Lindy Linderman... the list goes on!) Even when you believe in eternal life, the death of a loved one is a heavy burden.

Yes, Christian faith *overcomes* grief... but not all at once. For a time, faith alternates with fear. That's normal. Here we are, talking about Jesus' death four whole weeks after Easter! *Rev. Lance, can't we put it behind us? Can't we get on to happier subjects? Can't we push Pentecost up to today? The choir had such a rousing anthem about the Rhythm of LIFE and you talk about death and grief?*

It was going to take *some time* for (one after another, each in their own way) those early Christians to *find relief* (one day at a time) *from their grief*. For Thomas, it took at least eight days to *re-vitalize* his faith. (*Until he could say: "My Lord & my God!"*) For others among Jesus' followers, I suspect, it took *a long struggle* to overcome their doubts, their anger, and the bitter taste of betrayal. *Grieving*, even under the *best* of circumstances, is a slow process.

It was going to take some time for them to *trust people* again -- for them to be able to *rely* upon one another. It was going to take some time to begin the

work of *re-committing themselves* to Jesus' Gospel. They would have to tell their stories, over & over! That's what we *do* during Eastertide.

The disciples were people *blinded* by grief, because they had a loved one who *died*. For them, time stood still. And they were also *angry*. Angry because it was an unnecessary death, an unjust death, a betrayal of innocent blood, a life cut off too soon. (*Jesus was only 33 years old!*) Their *grieving* feeds their anger, their *faith* alternates with fear, their *hope* is swamped by hurt.

They seek *certainty* -- solid ground -- but in the empty tomb, they find only the reminder that *the future is always open...* the future is always unknown! The *mystery of death* is compounded by the *fear of the unknown*. They don't know what to think! And that's normal. Thomas wasn't the only one who had doubts!

These women and men knew Jesus, and I believe that they had faith, even though it was in turmoil at the time. I also believe that they had hopes... *Hopes for the future* as good as our own... But those hopes were *squelched* by feelings of personal inadequacy, guilt, memories of betrayal, denial, fleeing... now the doubting, and other mistakes that were being made.

Susan, the preacher last Sunday in Cleveland (whose bulletin we are using this morning), made another important point: Jesus could have come to them *with attitude!* He could have thrust his nail-pierced hands in their faces, saying: *"You see?! You see what your abandonment and betrayal cost me!?* *Where were you guys, when I needed you!?* *You bunch of cowards!"*

But he didn't. When Jesus came to them -- into their locked room of fear and faithlessness, into their turmoil and grief -- he simply *stood among them* and then he said "*Peace be with you.*" No recrimination; no shaming, no blaming, no judging, no complaint. All that would have been *justified*, for the way they had behaved so badly. But he offered them "peace!" There you have it, *the Way of Jesus is the path of peace*. Peace and reconciliation is our calling as a Church, if we are to be truly an Easter People.

The glorious Good News of Easter -- in all its *joyful* promise, its *profound* truth, and its *majestic* meaning that echoes through the ages -- does not dispel the *fact* of Jesus' death (nor the fact that *every one of us* will die). In fact, the Easter story reminds us annually that *death* is a *part* of human life...as is birth.

Every-one who is born will *one day* die! (*You heard it here, folks!*)

Jesus died. He was buried. He rose *beyond* it, yes. He rose *above* it for our benefit...but Jesus was not spared the *experience* of death. No one is.

Similarly, his disciples (his followers) were not spared the experience of *grieving*. They had to work their way *through it!* Again, I believe, *for our benefit*, for grieving is *our* lot in life as well. No one is spared, except those who die young (those who die before losing a pet, or a relative). In life, we will *all* know grief. Thomas was not alone in his doubts, his anger, his denial.

To grieve, upon the death of a loved one, is *natural*. It's the way we are *made*. (It's automatic.) And because it is *universal*, and because it is *natural*, I believe grieving is given to us by God; perhaps to demonstrate the depths of *meaning* that our lives have on one another. We wrap ourselves around each other's hearts as we go through life. It is that very *joy* and *meaning* that *others give us* which causes us the *pain of grief* at separation.

But in the aftermath of Easter, we also know that *the God who loved us into being* – and whose Spirit *breathes* in our bodies of dust – will also embrace us *beyond* the grave. That's what *resurrection* means! (That will be the theme of next Sunday's service: the Creator of all the world, of every Earth-Day plant and animal, also made you and me. And what God makes, God loves!)

The Good News of Easter (of *life beyond death*) does not dispel the *fact* of Jesus' death, but it gives death *new meaning*. It assures us, as no other event in human history has been able to do, that *God's love will not leave us*, Jesus will embrace us and *forgive us*, Christ will come to us, yes, even beyond the grave.

The Christian gospel offers every grieving widow, *every heart-broken youngster*, a permanent "happy ending" to the story of a person's life. Easter brings us to a place where *the pain* of separation and *the fear* of dying is past, where the circle is unbroken, and every hurt is healed. But *it does not remove* the preceding tragedy and loss.

The Christian faith does not *close its eyes* to death -- we look *beyond* death. We believe what we see... but we *also* believe far *more* than we can see.

(Just because we're Christians, who believe in life after death, doesn't mean that we *have to "explain everything."* There's a lot of *mystery* in the events of Easter. There are a lot of unexplained experiences in these stories.) Even the Risen Christ (Jesus) doesn't seem to be able to "make it all better" regardless how much he tries!

So, it may be more "Christlike" just to *be there* -- as was Jesus, standing with them in that locked room -- if you want to let someone know that you care. Grieving people sometimes just need us to *go to them* to let them know *we are with them*, we are there *for* them, and that we love them.

It may be more Christlike to go to them where you are *not expected*. Even where it seems, in their grief, that you have been "locked out" (excluded) even as *Jesus had been locked out* from the Upper Room! When people are in grief, they huddle in fear. *Come* to them anyway. Be *with* them. Draw *alongside*. Even if you have "an axe to grind" with them, "a bone to pick" with them for something that "they've done you wrong" -- to be Easter people, in the aftermath of grief, we must be willing to enter *their* world. No holds barred; no conditions.

If they are angry, that's OK; it's natural. Offer to them, as Jesus did, *words of Peace*. If they feel weak and shuddering, remind them that *they have the Holy Spirit* to strengthen them. If they have regrets, remind them that they have power to *forgive*. If they feel all alone, get close to them -- come to them, *before* they have to ask. *That's* what the Risen Christ did, over and over. Eat with them. Make yourself available to them.

To be an Easter people in our world (a world suffering from grief and loss, injustice and anger) is sometimes *scary*. It makes us just as *vulnerable* as they are. Jesus had to show his hands, his side... He had to allow Thomas to point at his wounds, to poke at his scars! *Whatever it takes* for their re-assurance.

When you find yourself in the *aftermath* of *grief* -- as we all will, from time to time -- with its initial *shock* and denial, its *bargaining*, alternating between faith and *fear*, occasional bursts of anger, feelings of *guilt*, depression -- remember those disciples locked in their room with their doubts and their fears. Realize that Jesus (and the Church) have *all gone through it ahead of*

*you*, and that it'll be OK. Take heart, and be of good courage! The rhythm of life is a powerful beat!

I say: *thank God for Easter* (for the promise of eternal life that it secures for all) and also *thank God for you*, the Church: the *reborn Body of Christ* in this place at this time. To be an "Easter People" (as Avery & Marsh call us) gives us courage to *face death* -- to face our fears, to face our doubts -- and to *give comfort* to those who mourn.

We live in the aftermath of Easter, and that's a *good* place to be!