

I invite us to turn now to the story which comes immediately after the Easter story in the gospel of John. John is the only one to record this story we are about to read about Thomas and his doubts. The term “Doubting Thomas” is a common phrase in our society’s lexicon. Many use that term and don’t know where it originates.

But calling Thomas “Doubting Thomas” as if this is all that he does in the Bible is very misleading. Thomas appears earlier in the gospel of John as well. We learn in chapter 11 that his name means “twin” although we do not hear anything about who his twin may be. I am reminded of identical twins I know who are simply called “twin” because others can’t tell them apart. If you are a twin then you have a character in the Bible that you can relate to.

In this earlier story Thomas could be called “Courageous Thomas” for his willingness to follow Jesus on his way to bring Lazarus back from the dead. In chapter 14 of John we could call him “Confused Thomas” or “Inquisitive Thomas” for he asks for Jesus to give him guidance. Jesus responds to Thomas by sharing that he, Jesus, is the way, the truth and the life. So throughout the Bible Thomas is seen in various roles.

But let’s read about where Thomas is in this story that John tells after Mary Magdalene and Mary discover an empty tomb and are given guidance to tell others the good news.

Read John 20:19-31

I have invited you to share your doubts this morning. As we began worship I invited you to write on a piece of paper what you have doubts about. I will share what we have written:

Share comments

There are two terms that describe a certain segment of our population. They mean the same thing. One term to describe this particular group is “C & E Christians” and the other term to describe the same group is “Chreasters.” Who knows what it means to describe someone as a C & E Christian?

You can, therefore, guess that the term “Chreaster” is a combination of the word Christmas and Easter. These are people in our culture who make it a point to visit a house of worship on Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday. These are the highest attended worship services of the year in every church that I know of. And, therefore, the Sunday after Easter and Christmas are the lowest attended services of the year. New faces are replaced by empty pews.

It used to be seen as essential to visit a house of worship on Easter and Christmas but that is becoming less and less the case. And we in the church put a lot of effort into our worship services on those days. Last week, for instance, is the only time of the year a crowd is going to gather as the sun rises and join together in worship. Easter is the only time of year you can get worship leaders to show up to lead worship when it is still dark outside in the morning. Amen to that?

Easter Sunday should be the highlight of our worship experience. We need to be reminded that death is not the final word. That evil is not victorious but that God through Jesus Christ is victorious over evil and death. We should put every effort into celebrating this reality and welcoming everyone who comes to worship that day.

But if we are honest with ourselves we know that the pretty family pictures in front of the flowered cross on Easter Sunday is not how life is on Tuesday after Easter. For on Tuesday, our cute child that posed with the smiling face threw up all over his momma due to a virus he picked up in daycare that day.

The teenager who put on the pretty dress on Easter Sunday against her will is telling her parents how dumb they are on Tuesday. The parents of the family that find time to show up for the Easter picture is working late on Tuesday and misses the family meal.

The ease of Easter Sunday is replaced on Tuesday by the pressure of a yard sale or festival to plan.

The gospel lesson that we read today is closer to our reality for many of us than women being led to an empty tomb. For many of us, doubt is more real than miracles. If you think about it, we can probably point to many more times that we have doubts about something than we have powerful revelations or miracles about something.

We are more likely to doubt something this week than we are to say, "Wow that was an amazing act of God." So maybe being in a house of worship on the Sunday after Easter is a more real place to be than a house of worship on Easter Sunday. Because it is today that we hear a story that is closer to what life is really like for us. A story of doubt.

Based on the comments that were shared it appears that there are lots of things that we have doubts about. So with our doubts in mind, let us turn back to the Scripture that we read from John. The scene begins with the male disciples locking themselves into a room out of fear. I shared last week during the sunrise service that we all should be thankful to the women who carried the story from the empty tomb while the men were locked away in fear.

But we can understand the fear of the disciples. They had seen their Messiah betrayed by one of their own, tried and convicted by both religious and civil authorities, and then brutally executed. The disciples feared that they would be the next ones to be tortured and killed.

The text says that the disciples were fearful of the Jews. We need to realize that this is not a condemnation of Jews but of the Jewish leadership that the disciples saw as their adversaries.

Fear has driven the disciples into this closed room where they are gathered trying to decide what to do next. But fear is never a good force behind the making of decisions. As German chancellor Angela Merkel has recently said, "Fear has never been a good advisor." If we live in fear then everything else looks like a threat.

Into this room of fearful disciples Jesus appears to share words of peace and reassurance. But Thomas is not in the room at the time. He does not receive the words of comfort. As a sign that Jesus was effective in his outreach the disciples tell Thomas what he missed. But Thomas only wants the same as the others. He wants to see it for himself.

So a week goes by and Thomas is with the disciples again. Once again the doors are shut. Jesus appears to them and Thomas can now have the same experience. Notice that Jesus invites Thomas to put his hands in the wounds of Jesus but we do not know if Thomas actually does it or not.

The text never tells us whether or not Thomas actually reached out and touched Jesus. All we know is that after receiving the invitation from Jesus that Thomas declares, "My Lord and My God!"

So this Sunday is set aside for the doubters among us. If we are honest with ourselves we know that the doubters among us are all of us. We have doubts at times whether or not God is real. We have doubts among us about if God is picking on us for some reason. We have doubts among us about the motivations of others. We have doubts among us about whether or not we will be OK. Yes, we are all doubters at times in our lives.

Thomas is not always a doubter. Sometimes he is courageous. Sometimes he is inquisitive. But through it all he stays in relationship with Jesus.

We are not always doubters as well. Sometimes we are courageous. Sometimes we are inquisitive. And I think that on this Sunday after Easter when we recognize the real world that this is all that is asked of any of us.

We are invited to remain in relationship with Jesus while we have doubts. To keep sharing these doubts with him. To keep asking and praying and seeking guidance.

We are challenged to not let fear be our guide. Fear usually doesn't lead us to good places.

But we do receive words from Jesus to stay focused on being in relationship with him even when we have our doubts.

Doubt does not lead us away from God. Doubts can lead us toward a stronger relationship with God through Christ. AMEN.

+++++

-Given: April 23, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)