

Saint Thomas the Questioner

April 23, 2017

Good Morning. So my guess is that if you have read this passage before, or if you have heard a sermon on it before there is one word floating in your head right now. So let's just say it out loud, when I say "Thomas" what do you immediately think? Yes, say it out loud, I say Thomas and what pops into your head — Thomas??

Now let's just take that word, that concept, and put it aside. Mentally just stick it in the pew next to you or chuck it into the blank pew space in front or behind you. Let's put it aside. And for a moment take another look at this story.

So for a long time now, I have chosen to not demonize Thomas. I acknowledge him to be fully human and the first apostle. Thomas has weathered history a bit the worse for the wear, but as I read his story he does nothing wrong. In fact, I ask my congregants at least a few times a year to keep their wits about them in church, they have heard me say, "Please do not check your brain at the door to the church — because I need you to have it!" And if for no other reason than this one, I admire Thomas because he did not check his brains at the door. Yes, he was human and yes, he needed some confirmation of what the other disciples had told him.

In this story I do not read Thomas as obstinate, instead I read the story of a very faithful man, one whose faith was deep and strong. But this is also a story about a situation that was totally out of control and overwhelming. And in this moment I do not see a Jesus judging Thomas, instead I see a Jesus who shows Thomas exactly what he needed to see to understand, in the loving way that a mentor teaches us a complex skill.

To begin to approach this scripture, one might imagine how disorienting those initial days of Christendom were. The disciples are in total disarray. Their leader arrested from right under their noses, betrayed by one of their own, and then their leader turned publicly into something that he was not on trumped up charges. Finally put to death by the occupying army. Those who followed Jesus were disappointed, dismayed, distraught, and were left fearing for their own lives.

They were a group of people in pain. As I have learned in my own life, the only thing harder than grieving alone is grieving with others, especially if they are your closest friends and family. The disciples stand here, in this passage battered and grieving. They want to hold to any shred of Jesus that remains. Their grief, as a group, was shattered open on Easter morning as they began to understand that Jesus had arisen. Their grief was fractured like light passing through a prism, the light once one now showing its layers. One can choose to view this fracture of the light by the prism—with further grief missing the white light that had been present a moment before, or one can look upon the new casting of the layered light which has become a rainbow splashed on the wall and one can choose to see the beauty in the colors stacked each upon each other.

I often wonder how much of our reading of the scripture would change if we could just hear the tone of voice that was used, or the tone of voice that the author intended. In our minds, I fear that many of us have been trained to hear this passage in a very critical tone of voice. What if this passage is not about judgment of others, criticism, and defensiveness? What if we are not meant to read this passage feeling repelled by Thomas?

What if we take it at its name, the Gospel for this day? What if this passage is really good news for us and our world today? How then would we read it to one another? Jesus may not say nastily, “Hey you, here’s your ‘evidence.’” Instead Jesus may say, “Thomas, my brother, I understand your pain. It is too much to hope for that I have come back to you. Here, here are my hands, look, see, believe.”

Let us remember today that we are talking about Saint Thomas. This scene we read today did not lead to a break down in relationship between Thomas and the church or our tradition. This scene between Jesus and Thomas did not lead to him being excommunicated or erased from our tradition, instead it has remained for us all to learn from for these 2,000 years. If we find that we emulate saints — which may be questionable to some — then I would suggest that Thomas is worthy of emulation. We should learn with him and from him.

Bruce Epperly writes:

Thomas’ doubt is a quest for faith. It is not doubt for doubt’s sake. When he finally encounters the Risen Jesus, he is transformed and eventually journeys to the East to share the Gospel in India. Yet, the Jesus he encounters is still amazing to us. In a world where God is identified with power, and some see Christ as coming down from heaven to destroy the earth, the Jesus Thomas discovers is known by his wounds. God in Christ suffers and still suffers the pain of crucifixion. God in Christ is still wounded.

Thomas’ story does not end with this scene, instead like Peter and Paul and the other early church leaders, there is evidence that he went out from Jerusalem to preach and teach. There is evidence that he eventually made it to the Jewish diaspora on the western coast of India — where he converted some of the Jewish people and many Hindus to Christianity. Thomas, Saint Thomas, took this experience with the Risen Christ and put it to use in his daily life, fueling his ministry even to the far reaches of the known world.

So today I would like for us to think about what it would mean to ask Saint Thomas the Questioner to be part of our faith lives. The church needs us to be Questioners, needs us to be on a quest for faith. To do this though, we need to question ourselves, our community, and our world. We need to step out in faith, questioning, so that our faith can grow and we can learn.

All too often today, we are satisfied with the most obvious answer. We rely over and over again on knowledge that we have gleaned from TV, Movies, and other media. But I fear that we do not question what we are taking in. We do not question whether or not what people are telling us is

true. We do not question when someone says, “I read it on the internet.” We do not question when we meet a “friend” in a chatroom or other virtual reality.

Today as we learn from Saint Thomas the Questioner, I’d like to invite you into a new reality of faith. I’d like to invite you to begin to view our world through the critical lens that our faith provides. So that when the media tells us that whole groups of people are violent (for example) — that sets off a red flag and brings our questioning to the forefront. Why does this person, or this show want me to believe that lie? Why would they want to stereotype that whole group of people that way?

Jesus was a questioner of the status quo of his day. When they told him that he couldn’t eat with tax collectors — he said: Why not? When they told him that he could not heal anyone on the Sabbath — he challenged them and healed any way. When they traded in the midst of the temple “because that is how it is done” cheating the religious pilgrims, Jesus turned over their tables and said, “not in my Father’s house.”

God has created us as sentient beings, created us with free will. Surely God does not want us to be faithful zombies, sitting stone faced each week in the pew, with our faith having little impact on our daily lives. Notice that Jesus does not judge Thomas here. Instead he offers up his wounds, so that Thomas may see. Jesus wants us to believe, and wants us to question. He understands that we have brains, that we want answers. That our judgment is sometimes clouded by grief or fear. And he wants us to love our neighbors — all of them. And to do that, we need to understand that our world at times pits us purposefully against each other. And when we see this tactic, we need to name it and work against it.

I know that this world is scary. I know that many of your hearts have been broken open by life, and by grief. I honor those wounds. As your wounded Christ honors your wounds. But when you are able, in the moments of resilience and strength — don’t allow yourself to always go on auto-pilot. Don’t venerate “blind” faith. Bring your brain to church, and to your daily life. Allow your questions to show you the way to the Risen Christ. Amen.

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