

Doubt with Faith: It Works!

By Janice Rose

Today is the Sunday after Easter and in churches all over the world, churches of different religions, congregations are celebrating today as St. Thomas Sunday. St. Thomas as in Doubting Thomas. The apostle who was a real skeptic, the one who asked so many questions, the one who acquired a negative label which has endured for almost two thousand years. Surely you have heard an expression such as “Don’t be such a Doubting Thomas!” or “You are really a Doubting Thomas!” While I knew the story of HOW Thomas the Apostle acquired that description, I didn’t really learn the rest of the story. It just seemed to end with the doubt. I grew up knowing the term is based on the Biblical account of Thomas the Apostle, who doubted the resurrection of Jesus and demanded to feel Jesus' wounds before being convinced as we heard in the reading of John 20:24-29. After seeing Jesus alive and receiving the opportunity to touch his wounds — according to the author of the Gospel of John — Thomas professed his faith in Jesus. But I didn’t study Thomas or learn any more about him. And then I received this opportunity today. To read, study, and share something of these verses in John. On the very first reading, I found

several great subjects and all in such a short passage! But the one thing I really wanted to share with you is the fact that Doubting Thomas was a very brave man who had tremendous faith!

In preparation for today, I learned that there has been and continues to be disagreement as to the identity of Thomas. In 3 passages in John, Thomas is identified as Thomas Didymus; Didymus meaning Twin in Greek. The name Thomas comes from the Aramaic word for twin so in John, they are really saying “Twin Twin” omitting his actual name. There have been some writings that try to identify this brother or sister but without success. Thomas may have been a fisherman by trade and may have been a native of Galilee. As an apostle, Thomas was tremendously loyal and loving of Jesus. Thomas possessed an inquiring spirit. AND he was skeptical to the point of being more of a pessimist than any of the others.

In John Chapter 11 we read the story of Jesus telling the Apostles about making the journey to Lazarus' home in Judea, but the Apostles questioned the wisdom of that journey as there would be strong possibilities of his being stoned, perhaps killed. Thomas, with no hesitation, jumped

in and said, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him"* (John 11:16). Now that is quite a powerful commitment. This should tell us something about Thomas' character, his loyalty, his faith, his love for Jesus. How did a person with this attitude, end up with the tag of "doubting?" Let's see if there may be another view.

During the days of Jesus' capture and the crucifixion, emotions ran high. The Apostles were feeling a multitude of intense feelings: stress, fear, anger, loss, sadness, confusion, persecution and weakness. I'm sure they were not eating or sleeping as needed. Everything they had believed in had fallen apart when Jesus died on that cross. So, they gathered behind closed doors in the upper room to meet and assess the situation, to address the fears, the loss, and perhaps to make a plan. To determine what they needed to do, what they should do. We know Thomas was not at the meeting. All these years, his absence has been in a negative light. He failed Jesus, he was failing his fellow Apostles, he wasn't a team player, he was out doing who knows what. The Bible does not tell us where he was or what he was doing or why he didn't attend this gathering. It seems everyone just rather assumes his absence is a negative, a real mark against Thomas. But....what if Thomas

was out trying to find Jesus? He may have been out questioning the women who said they saw Jesus. What if he was questioning Mary Magdalene, trying to understand what she experienced at the tomb? Perhaps he was too despondent to understand the time of the resurrection was here. What if he was out looking for the body? Looking to find those who would dare rob His tomb....rob it not of jewels and gold or precious material goods but of a body? They had already beaten him severely, they had spat upon him, they stabbed him, they crucified him....why would they now steal the body? What if Thomas was out seeking to answers to questions like, are the Apostles going to be arrested? Who is on our side, who might betray us? What is the political atmosphere today? Maybe Thomas was physically sick with all that had occurred. Maybe he was so very devastated that he was unable to get out. Fearful of persecution by the Jews, he probably wasn't staying at his own home. He must have been in hiding.

Have any of us ever felt so very low, so sad, so frightened, so confused or heartbroken that we couldn't function normally? Don't you think he may have been despondent, depressed, discouraged? Perhaps Thomas' failure to show up at this meeting isn't the negative it has seemed for so

many hundreds of years. So, let's ease up on Thomas for this point.

Now, let's look at the meeting. The apostles are gathered on the second floor, in the upper room, surrounded by solid walls, a roof, probably closed windows, a solid door that was closed and probably locked. And then it happened. Jesus was there. The supposed dead appeared among them. And it wasn't just one person who witnessed his presence.

Everyone saw him. This was no dream, no hallucination.

The first thing Jesus did was to offer them peace, "Peace be with you," he said. What did he mean? We pass the peace. Each Sunday we take those few moments to pass the peace. To say welcome, I'm so happy to see you, Peace be with you, how do you do? We heard the words from Jesus three times in this short passage. Jesus is addressing their fears. The word Jesus gives to fearful people, including me and you, is "Peace be with you." This is signified by Jesus entering through the locked door, the four walls, the enclosed room, and standing in their midst. Standing in our hearts. And with those words, we hear him say that there is no danger, your sins are forgiven and forever taken away, and harm shall come to you no more. Peace be in your heart

even as Christ is. This is a message for us today.

And then he breathed on the disciples, giving them the Holy Spirit, commissioning them to go into the world with the same authority He possesses. A divine gift. The authority and direction to go out and spread the word, to reach out to all people everywhere.

The apostles were filled with joy and when Thomas was told of the evening's events, he couldn't believe it. Not only was he doubting, Thomas was now faced with the fact that he missed out on the presence of Jesus at this meeting, the peace of Jesus to sooth the fears, and the power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus breathed into the very being of those ten Apostles.

We can understand the doubt that gripped Thomas. You know, it is difficult to believe in God's goodness when we see people suffering in an unjust world. With our news media and the internet, we see starvation, epidemics, intolerance, hatred, and people resorting to wars to settle religious and political differences. Think about what Thomas had just witnessed in those past few days. An innocent man, a man without any sins or flaws, his Messiah, severely beaten and crucified, the mobs, the taunting, the violence, the high

fervor for the persecution of Jesus, the fearful atmosphere of the city. And now the Apostles were telling him of the joy of that meeting. Thomas had his doubt, **but he was honest about it. And he remained in the group.** It might be tempting for someone who is experiencing a crisis of faith to pull away, to put the Bible on the shelf, to quit going to church. But Thomas didn't do that. At the next meeting, Thomas attends. Again, in the upper room, closed and secure, locked door. And here, for the third time since his resurrection, Jesus appears. The first thing he says is again, "Peace be with you." He then addressed Thomas directly. Notice how He approaches Thomas. Jesus doesn't blame him or punish him. Quite the opposite, Jesus offers his hands to Thomas to see, to touch, and to experience the wounds. Jesus pulled his robe aside and offered the stab wounds. This moment was like open arms welcoming Thomas back into the confidence and faith. We are not told if Thomas touched the wounds. But in John 20:28, Thomas responds with, "My Lord and My God!" The most powerful Christian creed ever confessed and he didn't think, he didn't hesitate, he just blurted it out: "My Lord and My God." Thomas was convinced. And because Thomas dared to struggle with doubt, his faith became even deeper. Thomas

doubts but he maintains the hope of understanding. He is struggling to maintain his belief in Jesus. Jesus does not rebuke Thomas and in this, Jesus shows his perfect love. Jesus shows an understanding of Thomas' struggle. Instead of casting Thomas out or pushing him away, Jesus instead draws Thomas closer.

We see that there is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is a problem with the intellect. The person wants to believe but has questions. Unbelief is a problem of the heart. Unbelief will not believe no matter what it sees. The Pharisees were struggling to disbelieve what Jesus accomplished. This was unbelief. Thomas was plagued by doubt. When his questions were answered, he probably did not need to touch the risen Jesus; I don't think he did: seeing was enough. (Have you ever heard the expression, "Seeing is believing?")

Often we may think we are the only ones to be struggling with problems which affect our faith: an illness, a death, a loss of employment, a divorce. We often have weak periods where we feel as if God has deserted us, as if he is punishing us. We wonder where he is and why he is allowing these terrible things to happen. This story of Thomas should

tell you that it is okay to doubt. We are allowed to ask questions. We are allowed to because as Christians we should then turn to our Bible for answers, READ HIS WORD. We should pray and be receptive to the peace that Jesus offers us. Do you struggle with understanding the Bible? Do you struggle with finding verses that address your situation? Do you feel inept at praying? Call your minister. Join a Bible study group. Offer your sorrows or struggles up for prayer within the church. Make contact with or meet with church members who may be able to help with your doubts, who will pray with you and for you. Let your doubt be the motivator for you to build your faith. Be brave enough to expand your faith, to move your faith to the next level. John writes that there is faith that is based on signs and there is faith that needs no signs; there is weak faith and there is strong faith; there is shallow faith and there is deep faith; there is growing faith and there is faltering faith. John shows us that faith is not a decision made once and for all, but faith is a decision newly made in every situation.

Jesus allowed Thomas to ask his questions even if they were full of disbelief and by asking these questions, Thomas grew in faith. Our brave Thomas grew so strongly in his faith that he spent his life traveling in the east, throughout Persia

and India. Some writers say he traveled as far as China. We do know there are a number of churches in India which trace their history back to the time of Thomas. Thomas grew so strongly in his faith that he died for Christ. He was stabbed to death in India for his faith. He died for Jesus, the Messiah he dared to question. Thomas showed us 2000 years ago that our religion can tolerate critical examination. Today intellectuals can question it and analyze it because it is based on historical facts. Jesus has lived in our world. He was among us as a man. He became a part of our history.

Nourishment of our faith comes from reading the Bible, from praying, from the sacraments, from attending church. We are invited to pray even when our comprehension is limited and our faith weak. We can't all be a Mother Teresa. We can't all be an apostle, a John, or a Thomas, or a Paul. We each must take our faith wherever it is, however deep it is, however fragile or strong it is, and strive to increase it. To grow it. To move it to the next level. Work with what we have and know that faith is a viable, living creature that must be nurtured, tended, fed, and protected. Thomas teaches us that we may be honest with our doubt and by his example we also see the joy of confessing: My Lord and my God. Will you let your doubt build your faith?? Peace be with you.