**APRIL 16 2023 John 20:19-31 “Our Friend Thomas”**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "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." 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.

The esteemed philosopher [Søren Kierkegaard](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6172.S_ren_Kierkegaard) said, *“Every mental act is composed of doubt and belief, but it is belief that is the positive, it is belief that sustains thought and holds the world together.”*  And so, with that lofty idea before us and the promise of more to come, we enter into this Eastertide, a time of both doubt and belief. For many of us, belief comes readily, almost easily. But for others, many, many of our brothers and sisters, belief is a tortured and twisting road. Hilly, too, and hard to navigate. This is especially important to remember today, when we ponder the words of St. John, whose overarching purpose in writing his fervent gospel is to encourage belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, because through believing and living into his teachings we obtain a quality of life that has been called eternal.

Today’s story begins after a genuinely *unbelievable* weekend; a tender banquet on Thursday, followed by an arrest, brutalizing and beatings on Friday, a scandalously rigged trial, and ultimately, a murder by torture. The deceased friend, teacher, son was dead too close to the Sabbath to prepare his body in time, and so they had to go back early Sunday morning. The surreal continued, with angels and earthquakes and appearances and visions, and the general sense that Jesus was somehow miraculously and magnificently restored to life. We enter the story on the evening after those early morning revelations, after a day of doubt and hope and wishfulness and bitterness and probably every possible post-death emotion and new birth emotion smushed all together! And into that seething caldron of raw emotion, despite the locked doors, Jesus steps right in.

The well-respected [René Descartes](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/36556.Ren_Descartes) said, *“If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.”* The disciples and those gathered there were real-life proof of his premise. They wanted the truth so badly! But there is was, in a form so unbelievable as to inspire intense doubt for some, and rapturous faith for others. Jesus offered them peace, showed them the proofs of his torture, and breathed into them the comforting, balancing presence of the Holy Spirit. That inward presence, and the teaching about binding and loosing of sin, deserves a full set of sermons by itself. For today we offer thanks for it but cannot explore it; our eyes are set on the star of the story, Thomas.

Our friend Thomas…such bad press he has gotten over the centuries! Doubting Thomas they called him, made him the butt of Sunday School jokes, but what he really is is an archetype, a scapegoat. They were all, **all,** filled with doubt at varying levels: even the first witnesses went running forth, as the good book says, with a mixture of doubt and great joy. They come to faith, and I am thrilled for them, but let’s not pretend that Thomas was the only questioning one in the pack. He *was* the most courageous about it, though…while others kept to themselves, he said it right out loud, "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."

Bad press notwithstanding, Thomas and his kin have a lot of intellectual and spiritual support across the centuries. None less than the Buddha himself said “*Doubt everything. Find your own light*.” Shakespeare would one day write *“Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.”* Well, fearing to attempt is not Thomas’ problem. He wants Jesus alive more than anybody, but he needs to *know*, not just guess, not just hope. Thomas will soon enough overcome his doubts, and go forth to bring the faith to the far reaches of modern-day India. He will write a gospel himself, one colored by the Buddhist surroundings in which he ended his lifetime. And his great evangelistic success is really due, not to a character flaw, but to his persistent setting of a high standard of belief for himself and his someday followers. Like so many of us, he doubts until he doesn’t need to doubt anymore. He could be the poster child for the philosophy of the great [David Hume](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/45726.David_Hume), who said *“In our reasonings concerning matters of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence. A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence.”* That is *exactly* what Thomas does. And it is exactly what *we* need to do, if our temperaments are like his.

Why has this chasm come to be, between those who believe easily and those for whom it is more work? [Friedrich Nietzsche](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1938.Friedrich_Nietzsche) had some definite thoughts on the subject: *“Christianity,* he writes, *has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin. One is supposed to be cast into belief without reason, by a miracle, and from then on to swim in it as in the brightest and least ambiguous of elements: even a glance towards land, even the thought that one perhaps exists for something else as well as swimming, even the slightest impulse of our amphibious nature — is held to be sin! And notice that all this means that the foundation of belief and even reflection on its origin would likewise be excluded as sinful. What is wanted are blindness and intoxication and an eternal song over the waves in which reason has drowned.”* Wow.I am not familiar with the Christianity of Nietzsche’s era, or of which particular believers he speaks, but I am confident they were not Methodists! For we, faithful, believing, confident followers all, might still have Thomas as our patron saint, if Methodists did the saint thing. All Thomas wants is a little reason, a little balance, a little proof. A first-century Wesleyan, Thomas was.

This divided nature of Christianity may or may not have given you pain over the years; if you grew up in this tradition, you were encouraged to think, ponder, dissect, doubt even. These were held to be virtues, not liabilities. You understood instinctively the wisdom of the fine theologian [Paul Tillich](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/41343.Paul_Tillich) when he wrote, *“Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”* And if that is your story, good for you. Take a seat right in the middle of the auditorium with Thomas and millions of other faithful who came to Jesus by the bumpy road. But this surely has not been the universal experience; in addition to those for whom faith is easy, there are others for whom doubt becomes a weapon of oppression. Hear the words of author [Tahereh Mafi](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4637539.Tahereh_Mafi): *“For so many years I lived in constant terror of myself. Doubt had married my fear and moved into my mind, where it built castles and ruled kingdoms and reigned over me, bowing my will to its whispers until I was little more than an acquiescing peon, too terrified to disobey, too terrified to disagree. I had been shackled, a prisoner in my own mind. But finally, finally, I have learned to break free.”*

This quote introduces yet a third kind of Christian; to the easy believer and the work-in-progress believer we must add the terrified believer. This kind is the sad result of paralyzing pressure from a group of easy believers, say, a fundamental church, upon a doubting person, who is so ridiculed for questioning that doubt and fear become their jailers. When you are too terrified to disobey, and too terrified to disagree, you have not reached spiritual enlightenment; you have reached the edge of a psychotic break. The people who create this dysfunction in others are not a church, but a cult. And it is the job of the balanced, the struggling but grounded like you and me, to gently reclaim these people, to help them become okay with a healthy level of doubt, as they slowly find their way back to a belief system that will lead them, like us, to eternal life.

In a nutshell, then, here is what I believe: for John, for United Methodism, for all of Christianity, the main thing is that people come into meaningful relationship with Jesus and his teachings and others who are sorting this stuff out at the same time they are. Some will breeze into that relationship with little effort. Some will work hard to establish and maintain that same kind of relatedness. Some will be forbidden an authentic relationship by narrow minds that allow for only one kind of experience, theirs. But in the end, with grace in play and love abounding, we will all get there. We have to get there! And we have to help each other get there. Amen.