

“No Doubt About It”

If I were to mention the names of certain disciples to you, and ask you to write down the first word that comes into your mind, it's unlikely you would come up with the same words. If I were to mention Simon Peter, some of you would write down the word “faith,” others might write “deny” while some would write “rock.” If I were to mention the name of Judas many of you would write down the word betray but not all of you. But when I mention the word Thomas, there is little question about the word most everyone would write down. It would be the word “doubting.” Thomas is so closely associated with this word, that we have coined a phrase to describe him: “Doubting Thomas.”

You might be interested to know that in the first three gospels we are told absolutely nothing at all about Thomas. It's only in John's Gospel that Thomas emerges as a distinct personality. There is not a lot about this disciple in the Bible but there is more than one description. When Jesus decided to head into Jerusalem the disciples thought that it would be certain death for all of them. Surprisingly, it was Thomas who said: Then let us go, so that we may die with him. Thomas didn't seem to doubt Jesus then. It was a courageous statement, but we don't remember him for that. We also fail to point out that in this story of Thomas' doubt we have the only place in all the Gospels where the Divinity of Christ is clearly stated. Isn't it interesting, that the story that gives Thomas his famous nickname, is the same story that has Thomas making an earth shattering confession of faith? “My Lord, and my God.” Not teacher. Not Messiah. But God! It's the only place in scripture where Jesus is called God without qualification of any kind. You are my Lord and my God! These are certainly not the words of a doubter.

Unfortunately, history has remembered Thomas for this scene where the resurrected Christ made an appearance to the disciples in a home in Jerusalem. Thomas was not present, and when he heard about the event he refused to believe it. Maybe he was the forerunner of modern day cynicism. Maybe the news simply sounded too good to be true. Thomas said: “Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side - I will not believe.”

Now I can't help but notice that Thomas has separated himself from the disciples and in his solitude, missed the resurrection appearance. I think that John's Gospel is suggesting to us that Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call the church, and when we separate ourselves from the church we take a chance on missing his presence. (Hmmm... where's everyone who was here last week?) But the story doesn't end here. The second time Jesus made his appearance - Thomas was present with the disciples and this time he

also witnessed the event. This time he saw and believed.

What can we learn from the life of Thomas? Jesus didn't blame Thomas for doubting. He knew that was human nature. So often the church's handling of doubt is to couple it with disbelief, and squash it. But Jesus never condemned Thomas. I think that he understood that once Thomas worked through his doubts, he would be one of the surest men in all Christendom. I must admit that I'm suspicious of people who say that they never have any doubts, especially people who always seem so sure about faith. Christ doubted! On the cross Jesus cried out, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" Even Jesus had doubts. Authentic faith always begins with intellectual honesty, and doubt is the foundation of honesty. To put it another way: Faith is not the absence of doubt; it is the overcoming of doubt. It had been common practice that people who had doubts about God would never voice those doubts. That would have been politically incorrect. Doubt has always been there; It's just that now, people feel more free to express it.

I have stood at many gravesides and I see people looking at the casket ready to be lowered into the grave and the look on their face often says: "I have doubts. Will they be raised from the dead?" And even if the doubt of being raised from the dead is removed, when that happens raises other doubts. Does it happen right after death? Or is it something we will all have to wait for until when Christ comes again? There is Biblical precedent for both. In 1st Corinthians it says, "And the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable." That implies the Resurrection on the Last Day. But as we heard from Jesus' words on the Cross to the thief being crucified next to him - "TODAY you will be with me in Paradise." A case for instant Resurrection. But also material that raises doubts. And for those who want proof, they are not going to get it in this life.

People all read the Creation Story. First Day - Light and Dark. Second Day - Seas and Dry Land. Third - Fourth -Fifth Day - and so on.... up until the 7th day when Jesus Vacationed. (See? Vacations are Biblical!) But then Science presents us with the Big Bang theory. And a time line of billions of years, which pre-dates the Biblical stories. So we have more doubts. Then that ultimate doubt. Who made God?! You may never have voiced that Doubt - but you can't be a believer in God without ever asking that question - even if only to yourself.

Doubts! We all have them. Even Jesus had them! Some Churches have said, "It's Sinful to Doubt." That's nonsense. It's normal to doubt! Alfred Lloyd Tennyson said: "There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds." So we find ourselves crying out, as did the disciple: Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. In other words - I have questions! Help me to find answers to my questions.

Doubt seems to make people uncomfortable. But once Thomas had his doubts removed he had a much stronger faith. Some doubts we can find answers for. Some doubts will go unanswered, at least in this life. Having doubt does not mean we don't have faith! There is a

prayer that is recited at every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, which can help us with our doubts. It's the Serenity Prayer that says: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

Having the wisdom to know which doubts can be answered and which cannot is the key to a strong faith. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr told how he lived with his doubts. He said he did it by: Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as Christ did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him Forever in the next.

Faith - is giving control of our lives over to God. Doubt - is basically saying we don't trust God. And with that kind of Doubt we will be like that man we have heard about who is reviewing his steps in that popular Parable of the Footsteps in the Sand. The Parable tells about a man who had just died and was reviewing the Footprints of his life. He noticed that along the path of his life there were two sets of footprints, as if Jesus was walking by his side. But he also noticed that along the way, when the path was hard and the walking difficult, there was only one set of footprints. This bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me by my side all of the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, at the times when I needed you the most, you would desert me."

The Lord replied, "It is true that when your path was smooth and the walking was easy, I walked by your side. But when the path was rough and the walking difficult, that is when I realized you needed me most - and that is when I Carried you.

It's okay to doubt. We are among some of the best of them. You may have read about the doubts that plagued Mother Teresa all her ministry. She admitted that with all the suffering, poverty and pain that she saw, she sometimes doubted the existence of God. Even she asked - Why would God allow this? Most of us understand about those doubts. If we had witnessed all the suffering that Mother Teresa witnessed, we would wonder where God was, too. But she never gave up serving God.

That's the important thing. She never stopped serving. We can learn from the life of Thomas that the most precious things in life can never be proven. Jesus said: Thomas, you have believed because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen yet still believe. I don't know how that makes you feel, but it's a great comfort to me.

Jesus is talking about us. We will most likely, never see Jesus in this life. We will not have the chance to put our finger in the nail marks. We will not get the chance to touch his

pierced side. It will never be proven to us that he was raised from the dead. Jesus understands it's harder for us to believe than for Thomas - and he calls us blessed. Blessed are those who have not seen yet still believe. We have Doubts. Mother Theresa had doubts. Thomas had Doubts. Jesus had Doubts. We do not come to church to remove our doubts. We come to church to strengthen our faith. And when we see how God works among us, we know that God is Alive. No Doubt About It! Amen!