

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the risen Christ, and from the spirit of the living God, amen.

This story of “Doubting Thomas” comes around every year on the week after Easter. I thought maybe when we switched over to this Narrative Lectionary that would change, but here we are and here we have this doubting disciple before us yet again. I think we’re too hard on ol’ Doubting Thomas. We don’t hear much about him until the last days or weeks before the death of Jesus.

Thomas wasn’t afraid to ask that question everyone else wanted to ask, but was too embarrassed to ask. Back a few chapters in John chapter 14 when Jesus had been telling the disciples he had to go away and that He was going to prepare a place for the disciples and would come again for them (John 14:2-4) everyone else was silent. When it seemed no one else would speak up, Thomas asked “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way” (John 14:5)? The other disciples might have been thinking the same thing but Thomas wasn’t shy about asking. When Thomas asked, “... how can we know the way, his question prompted Jesus to reply, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life...”

Thomas was also brave and courageous. When Jesus had decided to return to Bethany where his friend Lazarus had died, the same place where the Jewish leaders had sought to have him stoned to death, it was Thomas who spoke up after

the other disciples objected to going back into the danger zone. Thomas' half-hearted pep speech concluded, "Let us also get up and go that we may die with him..." This act of faith enabled Thomas to be one of the few who got to witness the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead.

I think it's unfortunate that Thomas has the label "Doubting Thomas" because he was never called that in the Bible. That's a label we've put on him and I think it's a bit unfair to him. How many of us, if we had been eyewitnesses of Christ and thought He was the Messiah, but was then later killed by wicked men using unjust methods, illegal trials and false evidence, would have doubted just as Thomas had? Wouldn't we too have given up when all our hopes were dashed to pieces when Jesus was humiliatingly crucified? I believe I would have. Thomas must have been heartbroken, having all his hopes crushed when Jesus died on the cross. We should realize the other disciples were not any less doubting than Thomas. After Jesus' death they were in hiding and had the doors locked for fear of the Jews, thinking they would be next (John 20:19). It was only after Jesus appeared to them that they finally believed. Matthew tells us at the first appearance of Jesus the first thing Jesus did was to show them his wounded hands and side. They had been thinking he was a ghost. Jesus even said to them a ghost doesn't have flesh and bone as you see that I have. So their doubts were taken care of by the compassionate revealing of his wounds by our wounded healer, Jesus

Christ. Thomas needed no more proof than what Jesus had already provided to the others.

I think a better nickname for Thomas instead of Doubting Thomas would be Bold Thomas. He was bold to ask hard questions. He was the first to volunteer to go back into harms way with Jesus. Even after the days of Jesus' resurrected appearances, Thomas was a bold evangelist and spread the Good News of God's Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as far as India. Church tradition tells us that Thomas was executed by a spear, but not until he had baptized many people. There are churches in India today that trace their origin to Thomas. Even if he started out his faith journey with doubts, he certainly overcame them and became one of Christendom's boldest proclaimers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's say we can't overcome our bias that Thomas was a doubter. Does that exclude him from being used by God? Well, not according to all the evidence from both the old and the new Testaments. Remember the prophet Jonah? He not only doubted God's word to the city of Nineveh, he actually tried to run in the opposite direction, which led him to be thrown overboard from the ship he was trying to escape on. He was swallowed up by a giant fish and only vomited up onto the shore after he agreed to go to Nineveh to proclaim God's word. In the New Testament we have the final scene of Jesus with his disciples according to Matthew's Gospel. After being with the risen Lord Jesus for 40 days and talking

with him, eating with him, Matthew tells us that just before Jesus ascended back into heaven, the disciples worshipped Jesus, but some doubted. Jesus must have known their doubts, but he allowed them all to worship him and to go from that point into history proclaiming He Is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! In fact, the Bible almost unanimously proclaims the people who are in the know, those who say “we know” this or that to be certain—the Bible portrays them as fools who really don’t know God at all. Jesus never once rebukes someone for doubts, but he does rebuke the know-it-alls...

As for me, I would rather be one who asks questions and reveals my doubts because that’s how our faith grows. Once you’re certain of the facts, then your mind is made up and no amount of evidence can ever change the way you think. I freely admit I’m still learning and asking and growing. When it comes to faith and Jesus I hope I never stop asking and seeking. I hope you never stop either. Maybe we can all learn and grow together in our faith.

I read an interesting analogy about this whole topic of doubting and growing in our faith this week. The author said when Jesus returned it was like giving the disciples a new bicycle to ride. Now ancient people near eastern people had never seen a bicycle so here’s how the metaphor was explained. When Jesus appeared both times in this Gospel text, his first words were “My peace I give to you.” The peace of Jesus is like a sturdy frame on a bicycle built for a long-long journey.

Without the Peace of Christ the disciples would probably still be in that locked upper room to this day... But Jesus put wheels on that bicycle. He told them that just as the Father had sent him into the world, so he was now sending them. Every time I read this commissioning of the disciples I can't help but recall John 3:16 that God so loved the world that He gave his only son, not to condemn the world, but to save the world... So, the mission we're sent on is the wheels of the bicycle. Jesus also breathed on them the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the energy they would need to pedal that bicycle to the four corners of the world. Finally, they needed to be able to steer the bicycle and to navigate through the hills and valleys, through the highways and the byways of life. So, Jesus gave the disciples a set of handlebars for the bicycle. The words, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained are just the thing we need to navigate our way as we continue this mission Jesus handed over to those first disciples and now to us.

When I learned to ride my first bicycle it had training wheels. Our training wheels are our sisters and brothers in Christ. It must have been so difficult for those first disciples to wrap their heads around someone, anyone, rising from the dead. It had never happened before or since for that matter. They had no one, other than each other, to help them in their walk of faith. We might not have the advantage of seeing the wounded hands or placing our hands into the side of Jesus

to see for ourselves, but we do have the faith of each other to encourage and answer our faith questions. We have the witnesses of all the saints who have gone before us. We have the faith of our parents and grandparents all the Church leaders from our generations all the way back to those first disciples who rode that first faith bicycle so long ago. Thomas rode his all the way from Jerusalem to India... How far will you ride your faith bicycle?

May the witness of the first disciples and the witnesses of all the saints in our lives, help us when we face doubts of our own. May the peace of Christ be our sturdy frame and the mission of Jesus compel us to proclaim God's love. May the Holy Spirit energize us to move into God's world and proclaim his salvation. And may the handlebars of forgiveness guide us along this exciting journey to make Christ known to all people by seeking them out, welcoming them into our community, and serving their needs as Jesus served ours. He is risen... And we shall rise in him. Amen.