

There they are. The disciples of Jesus, minus Judas and Thomas, gathered together, perhaps huddled together, inside of a locked room, for “*fear of the Jews.*” Sounds like a COVID-19 situation doesn’t it? Staying inside for fear of catching something. Locked inside though maybe not social distancing. Same effect for a different reason. Then Jesus appears among them and says, “*Peace be with you.*” That’s what we want right now – peace. Maybe Thomas can help us find that peace that is in Jesus in the midst of startling, fearful situations.

You may be interested to know that in Matthew, Mark and Luke we are told absolutely nothing at all about Thomas. It is in John’s Gospel that he emerges as a distinct personality, but even then there are only 155 words about him. There is not a lot about this disciple in the Bible but there is more than one description.

I personally tend to think of Thomas as sort of an Eyore figure – just sort of pessimistic in nature. I base this on my observation that when Jesus turned His face toward Jerusalem in John 11, the disciples thought that it would be certain death for all of them. Surprisingly, it was Thomas who said: “*Let us also go that we may die with Him.*” It was kind of Eyorish, but nonetheless a courageous statement. Yet we don’t remember Thomas for that!

We also seem to miss the point that in this story of Thomas’ doubt we have the one place in all the Gospels where the Divinity of Christ is clearly and unequivocally stated. It is interesting, is it not, that the story that gives Thomas his infamous nickname, is the same story that has Thomas making an earth shattering confession of faith? Look at his confession, “*My Lord, and my God!*” Not teacher. Not Messiah. Not Lord, or not just Lord. But God! It is the only place where Jesus is called God without qualification of any kind. It is uttered with conviction as if Thomas was simply recognizing a fact, just as  $2 + 2 = 4$ . You are my Lord and my God! These are certainly NOT the words of a doubter.

Unfortunately, history has remembered him 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. But he really did nothing different than the other disciples. They did not believe the women who came back from the tomb proclaiming that Jesus was risen. Those disciples did not believe until they saw the risen Christ with their own eyes. Thomas was doing nothing more or less than they did. He did however say: “*Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands and put my hand in His side I will not believe.*” However, when the time came, he did none of this. At that point for Thomas, seeing was believing, and that is good.

A Sunday School teacher asked her class for a definition of faith one day. One boy says, “Faith is when what you know ain’t so.” It’s a little bit funny and inaccurate at some level yet very true at another.

Some folks we do business with are fond of saying that if you have belief, if your dream for where you want your business to go is big enough, the facts don’t matter.

This could similarly be said of faith. If you believe or have a big enough faith, the circumstances are irrelevant. Frequently people believe even in the face of the impossible ... and the impossible occurs.

At other times, where there is no faith or belief, even that which is highly possible doesn’t occur. It could have, probably should have but it didn’t. Even though it was possible, no one believed it to be possible so no one did anything that might cause whatever it was to actually occur.

We have all heard it said that seeing is believing and we see it here with Thomas. Sometimes however, believing is seeing. When you believe what you see, that's not really faith, that's observation. The women who believed before they saw the living body of the risen Jesus – THAT was faith. The men who saw Jesus in the room and “believed” saw and observed. So did Thomas. They had observable proof. We simply have the evidence of an ancient narrative! And the martyr's deaths of the 12 who clearly DID believe what they saw and knew in Jesus! And with that, we may have a greater faith though not one as challenged as that of the 12. John writes in the end of his gospel that this is exactly why he wrote what he wrote – so that we may believe. And so, it is important for us to read this ancient manuscript that was written down so that we COULD read it. And believe!

Now, as a side note, I cannot help but notice that Thomas had somehow separated himself from the rest of the disciples and therefore, in his solitude, missed the resurrection appearance. Perhaps John 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 run the risk of missing His unique presence among us as we are gathered.

So, what can we learn from the brief witness of Thomas in the Scripture?

First, that Jesus will be experienced within the community of the faithful, so it is important to be a part of that community regularly and frequently. This, of course, is a BIG reason why many folks are really struggling during this time of “fasting from worship” as our bishop refers to it. The community, gathered together, often helps and increases our faith in a way that being alone or separated does not. Is this, the gathering together in worship, the only place Jesus can be experienced? Of course not, but it is an important one and one that should not be neglected. As the author of Hebrews wrote, “*Do not neglect to gather together as is the habit of some...*” Hebrews 10: 25

Second, that doubt serves a good purpose when it is doubt that seeks to believe rather than doubt that seeks to hide one from belief. Thomas' doubt was not for the purpose of keeping him from believing, which is what we often see in modern day skeptics. Thomas' doubt was so that he may believe. His doubt was backed by an honest desire to move ahead rather than some vague fear of moving ahead. Jesus welcomed his honest doubt and sought to give Thomas what he needed to believe.

Third and last for today, we see in Thomas an understanding that following Jesus is not an easy thing. It could be very costly as evidenced by his statement in the text I referenced from John 11 about going to Jerusalem to die with Him. Even as a pessimistic Eyore, Thomas was willing to pay the price to follow wherever Jesus led. Are we willing to step outside our comfort zone in order to follow and serve Jesus Christ? Wherever He may lead us? It may be simple or complex, near or far, free or expensive. Will you believe, and thus act, because of what you see, or in spite of what you see because of what and who you know? I hope so. And I hope you will hear His voice as He says, “*Peace be with you.*” Amen.