

We begin our new series with Thomas. And the transformation that occurs for him.

Thomas is known for his doubt and disbelief. This question that he raises. But he is also the one earlier in John 11 to say: let's go with Jesus so we can die with him.

And now. They're alive. But Jesus has died. They saw it with their own eyes. Judas betraying the one they loved and selling him to people with power who beat and slaughtered him on the cross.

And then early on the sabbath while it was still dark, they found the tomb empty. The resurrection had happened.

Mary lingered and Jesus appeared to her.

The disciples sat in the secret room and Jesus appeared to them.

They all saw Jesus with their own eyes. They all touched Jesus with their own hands.

Everyone, except Thomas.

And so though the eye witness reports of the disciples and of Mary come back to Thomas, Thomas says: "Unless I see his hands and feet and the scars, I will not believe."

Thomas gives voice to the longing and the question that so many of us have:
He longs to see and touch a physical, resurrected Jesus—just as so many of us would love to do and have the opportunity to do.
I'd love that, but unfortunately all I get is this plastic guy.

And Thomas gives voice to the question:

Did the resurrection really happen? I know how evil works—how it takes away life. I know how death works—you die and stay dead. Did you just see an angel? A ghost? Is what you're saying really possible?

If we're honest with ourselves, this question exists below the surface for many of us on Easter Sunday.

We heard last week about how the resurrection is not just a symbol but the reality that God is making all things new—it's the beginning of the new creation.

It's the declaration that God has broken the chains of evil and death. It's the moment that reveals the power of love over violence, of weakness over military and governmental power, of forgiveness of sins over retaliation.

It's an event declaring: life and newness of life, and transformation and resurrection is possible. And God will do it—transform, make new, restore us into relationship with the Divine.

Thomas had seen Jesus dead, beaten, buried. Experienced the trauma of it. and had every right to question the possibility of what they were saying. In the mess of all this trauma—is God involved at all? Is Resurrection possible?

And this book was written to the early Christians who experienced Nero sending them to the lions, setting them on fire to light his parties, crucifying them and slaughtering them. And they too had every right to ask: In the mess of all this trauma—is God involved at all?? Where is Resurrection life?

And it's written for us—who, if we look around the world and our communities at all wonder—in this moment of pandemic history, in the middle of grief, sorrow, fear and trauma—is God involved at all? is anything new and transformative still possible? While death plagues the earth—where is God's victorious power over it?

We voice our doubts with Thomas, with Jesus' cry on the cross, with the questions of so many saints throughout history.

At least, I do. Often once a week.

So often we think doubt is contrary to faith.

But the bible gives us rich history to ask questions of God, to wonder about God's absence, to give voice to our doubts and disbelief.

We'd like to be certain about everything, to have all the answers, to make sure our doctrine is correct, how exactly God is involved in everything. But we don't get that.

Many of us believe and have doubt. Believe and have questions. Believe and wrestle.

Our worship is faith and doubt mingled together.

Most of us have spoken prayers like Psalm 88 or 72—saying: we know you have said you're faithful God and you'll make the righteous flourish, but I'm not seeing that AT all! So what on earth!? Who are you if not that? My lived experience and what you're saying don't line up.

Or uttered the prayer from Luke:

Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!

Or yelled the prayers of Job at God: I did nothing wrong, I don't deserve this. I want to believe in you but I'm barely holding on.

I'd venture to guess most of us have faith only as small as a mustard seed, or a pumpkin seed on a good day.

Faith and doubt mixed together. And the bible gives us permission to voice our real live questions and doubts of today. (What are some you have??)

There's this interesting pattern that surfaces if you read this story alongside the story of the empty tomb....

On the morning of the Resurrection.

While it was still dark..... Jesus rose. Disciples raced to the empty tomb and run away.

Mary lingers and finds herself weeping. Overcome with sorrow.

And in her sorrow Jesus—the resurrected Christ—meets her. And speaks peace

Later the disciples. Are locked in a room. Full of fear—for who knows if the ones who killed the insurrection leader Jesus will come to wipe them out too?

And in the middle of their fear, Jesus—the resurrected Christ meets them. And speaks peace

And then there's Thomas, hearing the witnesses, says: we'll that's great for you. But I know how death works. I saw Jesus dead. I saw him buried. I saw him dead.

And Jewish ideas of resurrection weren't that it happened in the now. So no. No. I will not believe such hokish pokish nonsense.

I will only believe if I see him.

And in the middle of Thomas's doubt, Jesus—the resurrected Christ—meets him. And speaks peace.

Jesus then speaks these words to Thomas:

“Put your finger here; see my hands.

Reach out your hand and put it into my side.

Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

In the middle of sorrow, fear, and doubt the Risen Christ shows up and meets him, speaking peace. He greets Thomas' disbelief. And invites him to touch his wounds, inviting him to trust the Risen Christ's way in this world. Through this encounter Thomas' disbelief is transformed into a declaration of trust.

So often we see sorrow, fear and doubt as enemies to faith and life.

We say: let's get rid of sorrow, fear and doubt. Let's just make it through.

Let's be done with it. Let's numb or fix it.

Yet, here, Christ does not shame Thomas for his doubts, but meets him right in the middle of them. Accommodates them. Helps Thomas move through them.

Making us ask: what if our sorrow, fear and doubt are doorways to encounter Christ.

The very places the resurrected Christ meets us. The very places we can find life and transformation?

Obviously, we're not all going to get a risen Christ in a body in front of us.

We might never have enough proof in face of our doubts. Or a fully satisfactory answer in the midst of our questions. We have to be real and honest about that...I know I have a few that I'm still wishing for more clarity on.

But what if our doubts are places where Christ meets us? Doorways to encounter Christ and hear peace!

(What does that bring up in you when you hear that?)

I know this often seems contrary to what we've learned. But throughout Christian history we've sometimes said doubt can be a gift.....

A gift because it's a place where we learn to trust our community and their testimony of God:

we've said that the community upholds each other. You might believe not everything. Not able to say the "we" of all the statements we are saying. But someone else can believe it for you for a moment.

This book was written for the early church and for us....to say: though you have not seen Jesus. Though you have faith as small as a mustard seed—blessed are you! We've seen him on your behalf and testify it to be true.

A gift because it's a place we grow in faith: Buechner said 'doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. We know faith is alive because we're asking questions and seeking. That it is essential to faith so we can come to learn what we need to die to—what ideas we have God, the world and ourselves that need to die so we can know the true God.'

Thomas has to let go of the way he knows death and life to work, the way he knows God to work. No one expected this and yet, this impossible new life happened.

A gift because it's a place where we learn to live our lives as a testimony of faith rather than getting in a rut of thinking that we have to think all the right things about God. We can still testify with our lives what we know to be true about God.

After Mother Teresa died her journals were published and it became clear she had very few encounters with Christ and lived with much doubt. Yet this didn't stop her from testifying with her life what she knew to be true of Christ—that Christ was among the least and the poor.

A gift because it's a place where we can wrestle and come to know how God is involved in pain and suffering and then let those wounds and questions be gift to others:

Thomas' courage in asking the question allows us to see that our doubt doesn't exclude us from encountering and knowing God. And as we wrestle with our suffering brings up questions—when we look at our lives and say:

are you involved in any of this? We can then turn to others and help them ask the question and look for Christ there.

A gift because it's a place for us to look for, find, and encounter God among us. Just as Thomas' doubt allowed for an encounter with the risen Christ, so too a St. Named St. John of the cross taught that when we go through a dark night of the soul, it can be seen as a gift, that God is pushing us past our glib responses and shallow knowledge and encounter with God.

Now, doubt is not something to sit in forever, but it's also not something to simply banish....it took Thomas 8 days to find his way through it. And was transformed as a result of his vulnerability and courage to voice the longings and questions so many of us have.

But this story of doubting Thomas was a word of comfort for the early church and for us:

For: Blessed are we indeed, for many of us have believed without seeing, relying on the community.

It's an invitation:

If you have seen Christ among us, new life springing forth, hope in our moment—speak of it with one another, so that those of us struggling to find Christ in this moment may have your testimony as Thomas had the disciples.

And it's an assurance

And that if you are not quite at the place where you can believe wholeheartedly—there is space for you.

You with your questions are welcome.

You with your doubt are welcome.

You with your wrestling are welcome.

You with your fear and sorrow are welcome.

You with your suffering are welcome.

Perhaps they are the very places the risen Christ will meet you. Bring transformation to you. What if?

The God who took a few loaves and fishes and fed many thousands of people, knows how to take little things and bless them. God can bless your faith which is as small as a mustard seed.

Let's pray together: "Lord. We believe. Help our unbelief. Meet us right square in the middle of our honest, courageous, vulnerable questions of you and the possibility of your risen life in this world. Amen."