

Easter 2C: John 20:19-31  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### Thomas the Confessor

Nicknames are funny things. When given to sports figures, they add character, color, even an air of veneration. Think Earvin “Magic” Johnson. Michael “Air” Jordan. William “The Fridge” Perry. Eldrick “Tiger” Woods. Some of the best, most colorful nicknames though are found among baseball players. Babe Ruth, born George Ruth, was called Babe as a young player when he was young and naïve. Jimmy Wynn was known as “The Toy Cannon,” on account of the fact that he was a small but powerful pitcher. “Yogi Berra” was born Lawrence Berra, but was given the nickname as a child when a friend said he looked like a yogi as he sat around and moped after his baseball team lost a game. He grew into the name though, not only for the brilliant way he played catcher, but also for the countless bits of wisdom he bestowed on the world such as: “You can observe a lot by watching.” Then there are just goofy nicknames that stick. Ron Cey was known as “the Penguin” because he walked like one. Bill Lee was called “Spaceman” for the spacey out-of-this-world thoughts that never stopped filling his mind. And Catfish Hunter...well, he got his nickname from Oakland A's owner Charlie Finley, who thought all players should have nicknames. My favorite though is “Shoeless” Joe Jackson. His name comes from the fact that once when Jackson was playing in Greenville, SC, he took off his shoes before going up to bat. Apparently, his cleats were giving him blisters. And because of that one time the guy goes barefoot, he's known forever after as “Shoeless Joe”!

The same sort of thing happened to the disciple Thomas. We know him as “*Doubting* Thomas,” on account of his refusing to believe the other disciples that Jesus was resurrected. That one time he didn't *immediately* believe, and he is forever known as a doubter, and has become a morality lesson, a byword, a counter-example of anything we'd ever want to be.

This is not exactly fair. I mean, Thomas gets a lot of flak for refusing to believe until he saw Jesus for himself, but really he wasn't asking for anything more than what the other disciples had been given. Those others only believed when they saw Jesus in the flesh. So it's a little unfair to expect Thomas to be any different. And, fact is, once Thomas saw Jesus, he believed just as they did. In fact, he went further, making a strong, personal profession of faith, “My Lord and my God.” So you could make the case that a proper nickname for Thomas isn't “Doubting Thomas” but “Trusting Thomas” or, better, “Thomas the Confessor.”

But calling him “*Doubting* Thomas” is wrong in another sense, in the sense of misunderstanding what doubt is. Doubt means a weakness of faith, yes, a hesitancy to believe, but is often taken to mean something stronger, a decided *disbelief*, a skepticism, a refusal to accept what others believe, poking holes in arguments and questioning all claims to truth. Indeed, in the common mind, the doubter sets himself up, or is set up, against the faithful, as a challenger, a rebel, the “lone voice of reason” against the blinkered masses. And his views, his doubts are held to be more authentic, more honest, more mature than those who hold to conventional belief.

I was looking through some old magazines from college last week and I came across an article on the retirement of the chaplain I knew when I studied there. He talked a lot in the article about how, as a chaplain, he was sensitive to the tension students feel between the faith they had as children and the questions and doubts they have as they come of age. For him, he recalled going to college in the 60s and having his faith challenged by exposure to the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” the term given to the radical skepticism advanced by Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Darwin. These thinkers didn’t just doubt, they sought to undermine belief in really all values and institutions, but Christianity in particular. I’d heard all this before when I was a student and had been awed then at how sophisticated and profound he sounded when he spoke to us about the divine mystery and encouraged us not to seek answers but to “live the questions.” Today though, I read his words and what I hear is not someone who is sophisticated but rather someone who’s stuck. Stuck in his doubts, wallowing in them even, never really getting passed them. Which is quite something for a priest.

What most people, including this chaplain, get wrong is seeing doubt as the opposite of faith, it’s antithesis. You either believe or you don’t, you doubt. But that’s not how the Bible sees belief, and it’s not how psychologists and educators understand doubt. Doubt, they argue, is an important *component* of faith, indeed key to its development.

John Westerhoff, an Episcopal priest and educator, describes faith development as a matter of progressing through stages in life. The first stage, he says, is EXPERIENCED FAITH, the faith you have as a preschooler and early childhood. This is an imitating faith, learning to pray the Lord’s Prayer without knowing what it means, learning how to sit, stand, sing and the like. Faith here is a matter of "This is what we do. This is how we act." In early childhood comes the next stage, AFFLIATIVE FAITH, the faith that comes from affiliation, from belonging to a group, a church, and doing what the group does. “I am part of the church and so I believe and act this way.” By late adolescence, though, the faith received from family and friends is no longer sufficient. There’s a shift from “This is what we believe” to “*Is this what I believe?*” This is what is called a SEARCHING FAITH—experienced, affiliative, now *searching* faith. Thomas is our model of this. He will not blindly accept what others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself.

This is, it has to be said, a precarious stage. When believers reach this point, it’s often as teens and young adults, which is also when most cult groups recruit their members and when many "drop-out" of church. This is because many churches don’t know how to handle the questions and doubts that arise in this stage. Adults can forget what it was like to be young and have questions, or maybe they never reached this searching stage themselves, and so they see doubts and questions as dangerous, a sign of a lack of faith. And so, regrettably, those who are searching can be turned off or are forced out.

Mainline churches like ours, however, often pride ourselves on being very comfortable with questions, with doubts. Episcopalians like to say that our church is the “thinking person’s church” and a church you can attend “without checking your brain at the door.” That is amazingly smug and arrogant, and not altogether true. But worse, what such an attitude forgets is that doubts and questions are not the end. As Immanuel Kants said, Doubt is a place of rest but not a place of residence, a sign not of spiritual maturity, but of spiritual *maturing*.

There is yet another stage of faith development, the stage of OWNED FAITH, which only comes through the searching phase. After exploring the question, "Is this what I believe?", one, hopefully, discovers a Christian answer that declares: "This is what I believe."

This is in fact what we see in this episode with Thomas. He doesn't stay "doubting," regardless of his nickname. In the presence of the risen Christ, "Doubting" Thomas became "Believing" Thomas, and his doubts are transformed into a profession of faith, "My Lord and my God," the highest title given Jesus in all the Gospels.

Thomas' doubts thus paved the way to a deeper faith. And he's not the only one. That is true also of Martin Luther. He was weighed down by doubts all of his life, and those doubts led him to discover the power of *justification by faith through grace*, his famous theological formula. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was likewise beset by doubts, doubts about himself, but then his heart was "strangely warmed" by the preaching of the gospel. Even someone as saintly as Mother Theresa was a doubter. A book was published after her death in which she poured out her doubts. And yet she continued to minister to the needy despite her doubts...or perhaps because of them. For each of these, doubts were the catalyst, the "ants in the pants" they needed to spur them on towards a deeper understanding of God, of faith.

William Barclay puts it this way in his commentary on today's Gospel:

Thomas doubted in order to become sure; and when he did become sure, his surrender to certainty was complete. If a man fights his way through his doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, he has attained to a certainty that the man who unthinkingly accepts can never reach.

Paul Tillich puts the matter more succinctly, "The old faith must die, eaten away by doubts, but only so that a new and deeper faith may be born."

With this in mind, we should then hear Jesus' words, "do not doubt, but believe" not as words of reprimand, but of invitation. They are an invitation to not stay in an arrested faith development, stuck in our doubts, but to move past them, grow beyond them. It's understandable to have reservations, fears, misgivings, and fears regarding ourselves and God. Who wouldn't? As I said last Sunday, the claims of Christianity are pretty unbelievable. But too often that's where we stop. We let our doubts and fears become our identity and an excuse for not committing, for not trying, not engaging in the struggle of living faithfully in the world. But Jesus won't let our doubts or questions stump him. Or let them stump us either, getting in the way of his larger plan for us.

You see, in today's lesson, Jesus' return to the disciples wasn't simply to prove that he was alive. He came back to give them a task, a commission. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he says. His followers are to be his representatives in the world, doing the same ministry that he did when he was among them. Now, given all that happened in the past week, leading up to his death, this is a very strange, shocking thing to do. Why would Jesus send *these guys*, the ones who ran away at the first sight of danger, who abandoned him, betrayed him?

The reason, I suppose, is not unlike the one given to John Wesley early in his ministry. Wesley had become depressed, doubting his calling, whether he had enough faith, and he asked a friend if he should give up preaching. The friend counseled otherwise. "Preach faith till you have it," he advised. "And then because you have it, you will preach faith."

That may sound strange, but it is wise advice. For Wesley's friend was not suggesting he lie or misrepresent himself. The idea is that by putting himself out there, acting as if he had faith, commending the faith to others, Wesley was forced in that very action to step out on faith, to put himself in a position where he had to rely on God, and he thereby found his faith strengthened. That may be good advice for doubters like us too: act as if we have faith, act in faith, and don't be surprised when you find your faith strengthened.

Doubt gets a bum rap today among Christians. But doubts are not something we need to run away from. They are not a failing or a threat to faith. In our life we will have doubts. But our doubts or our faith is not the point. It is *God's* faithfulness that is our hope, not ours. It is God's faithfulness that takes us by the hand and leads us out of our doubts into a deeper faith, making our questions into opportunities to grow in trust and faith.

Thomas may have been stuck with his nickname, but he wasn't stuck with his doubts. And neither are we. Our doubts can be just the thing God uses to lead us to a deeper understanding and appreciation of God. So, "doubting," I guess, really isn't such a bad word. It is just another way of saying that God is working in us and he's not done yet. That is good news for all of the doubters and believers among us. Thanks be to God!