

UCC at the Villages
April 27, 2014
Psalm 16; John 20:19-29
'Courageous, Doubting Thomas'
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This week, as we continue with the stories of Easter, the disciples are gathered in a house and the doors are locked because they are fearful of the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. It's not a surprise that they would be afraid. Just days ago their leader had been arrested, questioned, tortured and crucified. Surely, it was going through their minds that this could be their fate as well.

They were probably recalling stores of their time with Jesus, remembering, laughing and crying – doing all the things that we would do after a good friend had died – they were grieving. And they may have been feeling remorseful about not staying with Jesus thorough his death.

Jesus had told them that he was not going to be with them forever, but they weren't quite prepared for what that really meant in their lives. They had spent three years travelling with Jesus, and their routine was broken. They were probably feeling lost and not sure what they should do next. Oh, and....they had heard incredible, unbelievable stories that Jesus had been seen alive.

They were paralyzed with fear, anxiety and doubt. So, they were hiding.

But then in the midst of this doubt and fear, Jesus appeared. And the first thing he says is “Peace be with you.” Jesus didn’t say – you were my friends – why did you run from me when I needed you most? No, instead he reached out and invited them to come and see his wounds, to be assured that it is him, and believe that he really is alive. And then he breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit”. That must have been a wonderful moment. Imagine what this meant to the disciples, those who denied him and abandoned him. Jesus came to them, and he came in peace. He still loved them.

But Thomas was not with the disciples and he missed seeing Jesus. Where was he and what was he doing? Why wasn’t he with all his friends? We could speculate about all sorts of reasons why ---- Was it his turn to go get food for everyone? Did he want to be alone in his grief? Maybe he was hiding by himself? Or maybe he was out ministering to the poor and preaching Jesus’ message. Was Thomas out in the world doing what Jesus would have been doing?

When Thomas returns, the other disciples tell him that Jesus had come to them right there in that room. But Thomas says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” So, because of this, Thomas has been labelled a doubter – but he was honest—wasn’t he! He couldn’t wrap his mind around what the other disciples were saying – it was just beyond his understanding.

The reality is, that Jesus’ appearance after the resurrection is hard to believe from our human perspective of reason and practicality. Which one of us has seen a person who had died and was buried, come back to life? It makes no sense. So, it’s not surprising that Thomas was having some doubts about whether this was true – after all, the other disciples had seen Jesus, and Thomas has not yet had that opportunity. If we had been there, we might have had the same reaction.

So who is Thomas the disciple, and did he really deserve to be labelled as a doubter?

Thomas is mentioned in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but the only time we hear from Thomas is in the gospel of John, and the first time

is when Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is dying. (We heard this gospel a few weeks ago...remember?)

The apostles beg Jesus not to go to Judea, because the people tried to stone him the last time he was there. Thomas, however, is the one to boldly speak up and say, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” On this occasion, Thomas shows himself to be loyal and courageous-- loyal to stand by his teacher and friend, Jesus, and courageous to go to a place where he may also die as one associated with Jesus. You have to admire his commitment to want to go with Jesus, even if it could cost him his life.

The next time Thomas demonstrates his commitment to Jesus is at the Last Supper. Jesus is speaking to his disciples about how he will leave them, they should not be troubled and that he will prepare a place for them. He tells them that they already know the way. Thomas pipes up and says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Thomas wants to know the details of where they are going so he can map out the route ahead of time and be ready to go---he sure seems like a practical kind of guy---doesn't he? Just asking questions and looking for a little clarification! He clearly wants to be with Jesus – he loves Jesus and he

wants to be sure that he knows where he is going so he can be sure to be with him.

So, Thomas was a good guy – loyal to Jesus, courageous in the face of impending danger, and practical. He had a great love for Jesus, his teacher and close friend. He also refused to say that he understood or believed something that he did not – so, maybe he was a little stubborn, and brutally honest!

But despite these qualities, the label that has been attached to him is “doubting.” He spoke up and asked the questions that the other disciples were thinking, but were afraid to ask. Maybe we’ve been too hard on Thomas. Maybe instead of hiding with the other disciples, he was courageously out in the open, ministering to the poor and preaching Jesus’ message.

So, our gospel continues a week later and the disciples are again gathered in the room and this time, Thomas is with them. We get the impression that they are still hiding -- some of their fear has vanished, but not all of it.

Seems like they are not fully ready to shout to the corners of the earth that Jesus is risen.

And, Jesus appears again! This time, he seeks out Thomas. He says Thomas...go ahead.... if this is what you need to see, if this is the evidence that you need -- here I am! Touch my hands, touch my side, see my wounds! Jesus really wants Thomas to believe it is him! Jesus wants him to experience what the other disciples had experienced. He does not say, “What...so you don’t believe what your friends told you about me?” Instead, Jesus is gentle, compassionate and patient. And then Thomas gets it – he realizes that this is Jesus, and the resurrection really happened, and Jesus was not just his best friend – Jesus is God.

Just like Thomas, we can be loyal, courageous and committed in our faith and express our doubts, and it is ok. Doubt, even if it feels uncomfortable, invites us to boldly ask the questions that we may not have asked before – it nudges us to read a difficult scripture over again and prods us to engage in lively conversations with others in our church community who have doubts just as we do. Expressing the doubts and questions of our faith moves us closer in community with one another, and towards a deeper relationship with God.

Just like with the disciples, the risen Christ will come to us and bring us peace --even if we close ourselves behind locked doors, paralyzed with fear and doubt.

Just like with Thomas, the risen Christ wants us to believe and gives us the space to ask questions. Even if our human mind can't quite comprehend, our still speaking God will meet us wherever we are, and speak to us in a way that we can understand.

And, just as the risen Christ was compassionate and patient with Thomas, we too should be compassionate and patient both with ourselves and with others who ask the hard questions about our faith.

Our faith is strong enough to know that God will come to us in our times of doubt and give us exactly the answers we need in that moment.

Like an adventure on an unknown path, if we express doubt and ask questions Jesus will bring us great surprises just as he did for the disciples – the breath of Holy Spirit, the hope of the resurrection, and God's everlasting peace.