

Doubting Thomas: Learning to Love the Questions

Shalom, God has made all things whole. Peace be with you.

After the intimate yet somber supper of Maundy Thursday, the terrifying violence of Good Friday, the quiet stillness of waiting on Holy Saturday, and then the unfathomable joy of Easter Sunday, our resurrection narrative continues this morning, and with it comes more questions and more wondering.

Jesus appears to his disciples in a locked house in Jerusalem in all of his resurrected glory, saying, “Shalom, peace be with you.” Jesus shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and side, and breathes on them with the breath of life, giving them the Holy Spirit and offering forgiveness. What wonderful news for Jesus’ disciples! Christ is risen!

Wonderful news, that is, for almost all of Jesus’ disciples. Somehow, one of the twelve missed it. You may have heard of him— “doubting Thomas”, the disciple who missed Jesus’ first resurrection appearance and needed to see and touch Jesus’ wounds to believe he had risen, the one who is often cited as an example of lacking faith and given a pretty bad report. I never wanted to be called a “doubting Thomas”, it was a shameful accusation.

But in John’s Gospel, Thomas is also called the Twin, perhaps representing someone we can all identify with, a sort of twin or mirror to humanity, who helps us see ourselves more clearly.

So, it is worth asking: What exactly was Thomas doubting? And as our twin, what might we be doubting on this first Sunday after Holy Week? What questions are you still asking?

For many of us, our doubts and questions may feel too shameful to even name. They may feel like a sign of weakness, or something that indicates a separation from God, or maybe they are just off limits in our beautiful church building. But isn’t

doubting and question asking an essential part of our growth?

I admire that Thomas leaves room for doubt. In the next scene of our Gospel story Thomas, now with the other disciples, is listening to their stories about seeing Jesus. As Thomas listens, I almost wonder how he could’ve avoided having any doubts, because their stories are so full of paradoxes. Thomas has just seen Jesus on the cross, but the disciples say Jesus is now walking around Jerusalem. Jesus was dead but apparently is now also alive. Jesus is still wounded but somehow has also been healed. And maybe the biggest paradox for Thomas to grapple with: others have seen Jesus, but for some reason he still hasn’t seen him. Jesus loved him, but still hasn’t appeared to him.

Yet, instead of closing off or hardening his heart, these doubts lead Thomas forward, into his own meaning-making. Jesus walking through the shut door again appears to the gathered disciples saying, “Shalom, peace be with you”. Then Jesus lets Thomas touch his wounds, and lets Thomas see what resurrection looks and feels like for himself, not just in theory but embodied in the flesh. And in Jesus’ pierced and crucified yet risen body, Thomas sees and experiences the answer to his questions. God has made all things whole. Peace is with him now and always.

All the paradoxes Thomas has been grappling with can exist, together, in God’s wholeness: death and life, wounds and healing, suffering and renewal, feeling forgotten while being remembered, doubting and believing. Nothing is outside of God’s love, and each part—as difficult and mysterious as it may be, is part of the same whole, and necessary. We are still grappling with this today: Christ is risen...yet death continues to exist alongside life. Our wounds will always be part of our healing, and we will experience suffering even while we are being spiritually renewed in Christ.

So, what if instead of trying to quickly resolve all these paradoxes of our faith and resisting our

doubts and questions, we left room for them like Thomas did. As the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke says: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...live the questions now...perhaps, you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

Thomas’ story gives us permission to sit with our doubts, to hold them with reverence, and to maybe even learn to love our questions. Then, perhaps, we will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Through our own lived experiences, we are now living into the season of Eastertide - the 50 days following Easter Sunday - and I think it is important to name that we never arrive at one final conclusion or tidy ending in our Easter story, or in our own faith. Easter is a new beginning that leads us into embodying the resurrection in our own lives, and with that comes more questions and more wondering. But with patience and wonder we will gradually come to live into the resurrection for ourselves.

So, may you learn to love your questions, and wait patiently for your answers. May your doubts become the source of your greatest wonder, and in all of the many paradoxes of your faith may you hear the reassurance of Jesus’ words: Shalom, God has made all things whole. Peace is with you, now and always.

Amen