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23:11

Doubting Our Way to Faith
John 20: 19-31

I want to take a quick survey among you.

How many of you believe the earth revolves around the sun?
How many of you believe astronauts landed on the moon?
How many of you believe germs exist?

Now, those of you who said yes, I believe, how do you know? What convinced you? What did you need for proof?

Ok, some harder questions.
How many of you believe in angels?
Do you believe in miracles?
Do you believe in a life after death?

And now the hardest questions, no hand raising needed:
Do you believe that Jesus was resurrected?
What do you need to believe?

Today's text is on "Doubting Thomas." Thomas is such a well-known figure that even today we call a skeptic a doubting Thomas. Personally, I love this story. Thomas is one of the very real biblical figures I can relate to.

We often think Thomas' big problem is that he does not have any faith. He needs to see to believe. He has a bad reputation and through the ages we have been told don't be like Thomas. We should believe without seeing, we should believe without having the experience. In actuality to deny our own needs for proof or affirmation or reassurance.

Actually, Thomas's real problem is that he was not punctual. He was running late to get behind locked doors with the rest of the disciples and missed Jesus' appearance. Or perhaps he was working late, or who knows. He just was not there at the crucial moment when Jesus appeared.

It is not as if the other disciples had such glorious faith that they did not need to see to believe. The reason the disciples believe is just that they happened to be there when Jesus appeared. They already saw.

What I really like about Thomas is that he stands in the midst of the jubilant disciples and holds fast to his inner truth. He 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." Thomas knows what he needs. He needs to see. He needs to be in the presence of the real Jesus, the one he knew and loved and laughed with and then denied and saw was crucified. His grief at Jesus' death is too fresh, too painful. Thomas knows what he needs. He needs to see to believe.

Thomas already has the hard part down. The knowing of what he needs to believe. (This is a tough one for us. To learn what we need, this I believe is one of our jobs as adults.) And not only does Thomas know, but he asks for what he needs. He needs to see to believe.

It is not like Thomas is a slouch of a disciple either. We have two other accounts of Thomas in the gospel of John. In chapter 11: 6 Jesus needs to go to Judea because Lazarus has died. The disciples warn Jesus that the Judeans want to stone him to death but Jesus is insistent upon going. At which point Thomas pipes up and says, "let us go that we may die with him." Not a statement that would come from one who is hedging his bets. Thomas has plenty of faith in Jesus. He is willing to go wherever the master leads him. He is solid.

But he is also a questioner. In chapter 14 Jesus is speaking to the disciples and says he will go and prepare a place for them. He says "and when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself that were I am you may be also. And you the way where I am going." What? Is this very clear? Do we really know what Jesus is talking about? Thankfully (for our sakes) Thomas asks "Lord we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?"

It is a fair question. Especially when Jesus starts speaking in ethereal, metaphoric language, Thomas saves us by asking Jesus to bring it back down to earth. Give me it in language I can understand, says Thomas. Where are you going? Give me resurrection in terms I can understand, says Thomas. I need to see to believe.

And because he asked for what he needed, because he is clear about the state of his faith, when Jesus does appear and calls him by name and offers his hands, Jesus is gracious., there is a certain generosity and tenderness in how he responds to Thomas. Jesus offers himself. For Jesus, faith arising out of doubt is just as valid as faith unseeing.

And in response to Jesus' loving gesture of revelation Thomas drops to his knees and says my Lord and my God. He didn't need to put fingers in marks.... He confesses his faith.

Many scholars say Thomas utters what is the most important affirmation of faith in the gospels. Dorothy Sayers writes that "it is unexpected but extraordinarily convincing that the one absolute unequivocal statement in the whole gospel of the divinity of Jesus should come from doubting Thomas"

Thomas believes not just in resurrection, but affirms Jesus identity. Yes, you are the one, the messiah, the Lord,

When we struggle with our faith are we as clear as Thomas in asking for what we need in order to believe?

What would it take for us to believe were we in Thomas' shoes? Would we believe our fellow disciples telling us Jesus was risen? Or would we too need to see for ourselves? What do we need now to believe that God can be resurrected in our lives? Do we believe when others tell us God will be there for us, or even when our ministers stand up and tell us God will be there, or do we need to see for ourselves? What do we need, to believe?

In my last year of seminary I went before my committee to defend my Masters thesis in May. This was the key moment after months of work on this project. I was incredibly nervous. I had been researching since the previous June, writing every day since January, and now three people were going to decide if the project passed or failed.

But more than that, I felt it was about whether I passed or failed. The worth of my person was on the line. I was scared. As I prepared for my defense, I wondered as I had wondered throughout the entirety of my writing, what would make me believe in myself. What would allow

me to believe my writing was worthwhile, but that also my worth as an individual did not rest on this one moment. What did I need to believe?

I went and sat in the seminary chapel for the half-hour before the defense. And as I looked up to the rafters I talked to God and prayed for peace, peace of mind, poise to answer the questions before me. But as I continued to talk to God I grew aware of what cautiously crept into my knowing. My heart told me what I needed in order to believe. And I said out loud, in a small quiet voice, "God, I want you to tell me you are proud of me." Silence. After a moment it was time to go. I left the chapel and went to face my defense.

The defense went incredibly well. Wonderfully well. Wonderfully affirming and I passed. But in truth, that was not the important part. For after the defense was over and my committee thanked me and I then, my mentor of four years came over to me and, for the first time ever since I had known her, gave me a hug and said into my ear, "I am so proud of you." A few minutes later I went out to share the good news with my friends who had waited for me out in the hallway. They each hugged me and separately said to me, "I am so proud of you."

Later that evening I went to work at my job in the library and one of my friends who knows me best academically asked me how it went, and when I told her the happy news, she reached over the library desk and hugged me and said "I am so proud of you."

Late that night I left messages for my parents letting them know how it all went. And in the morning, they called me up, said congratulations, and told me how proud they were.

None of these people knew what I prayed for in the chapel. Nobody knew besides me. But God knew. God who hears the faintest calls of our hearts. God who bent down to hear the whisper of one scared seminarian. God who knows you and hears the very cries and needs of your hearts even before you do. God was proud of me and in telling me through the wonder of all these people God gave me the very deepest desire of my heart. And once again affirmed my belief in a living, resurrected Christ among us. In that moment I needed to see, or rather hear, to believe.

Jesus knew what Thomas needed. He appears to Thomas and says "Peace be with you." His first words are not a rebuke but "Peace." And he goes over to Thomas and says "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." He tells Thomas to believe, to believe the good news, to believe that He is risen, that Resurrection has come, that new life is possible. He gives to Thomas what Thomas needs to believe.

Then he says to Thomas, "have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." We can hear this as Jesus rebuking Thomas for not believing immediately, but we can alternatively hear it as a blessing for us. For those of us sitting here are not with the original disciples in the upper room when Jesus appears, nor will we probably be visited by Jesus in quite such a dramatic way, though I would not rule it out. Thus, it is a blessing for us. We are the blessed ones who have not seen, yet have come to believe.

For we are getting story second hand. The writings about events 2000 years past. From perhaps questionable sources. What do tax collectors and women of the night and ignorant fishermen have to tell us? Well they are the shoulders we stand on.

Because they saw, we can believe.
Because they witnessed, here we are.
Because they knew and they believed, we can believe.

Rabindranath Tagore, 19th century Bengali poet and writer, wrote, "Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark"

We may not see the light, but we do not doubt its coming. We believe. Even when the night is so dark.

But what if we have not come to believe that resurrection is possible, for Jesus or for us, for our tangled lives? Or what if we believed once but cannot seem to believe now. That for us, Jesus is still lying in the tomb despite all the hubbub and noise of Easter morning?

What do we need to believe in a risen Christ, to believe in a world where God does care?

What do we need to believe in ourselves?

What do we need to be able to choose life?

What would speak to the deepest longing in your heart?

And so we ask ourselves what do we need to believe? Do you know? How might we doubt our way into faith.

I recently picked up Anthony De Mello's book, *One Minute Wisdom*. These are tiny vignettes that open windows on the divine in our lives. This is what the introduction says:

Is there such a thing as One Minute Wisdom?

"There certainly is," said the Master.

"But surely one minute is too brief!"

"It is fifty-nine seconds too long," replied the master.

The disciples were puzzled. So the master later said, "how long does it take to catch sight of the moon?"

"Then why do we put in all these years of spiritual endeavor," they cried.

The master said, "opening one's eyes may take a lifetime. Seeing is done in a flash."

Seeking after the resurrected Christ, seeking after God, may take a lifetime. But if we ask for what we need to believe, as Thomas did, perhaps as Jesus comes to visit us we may find ourselves able to say in a flash of seeing, "my Lord and my God."

Amen.