

## Two Kinds of Doubt – Kent Dunnington

John 20:19-31

A famous atheist named Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say if he died and found himself confronted by God, demanding to know why Russell had not believed in him. Russell said that he would reply, “Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.”

I suspect that many of us can identify with Russell’s response. Therefore, when John tells us that “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book,” we cannot help but think, “Surely that was a mistake” (Hauerwas). We think that we need all the evidence we can get.

And that is probably why, for many of us, Thomas appears in this story as a bit of a hero. Finally, someone stands up to God and says, not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence. “Unless I see the mark of nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” This sounds like a man for our times, a true skeptic demanding hard evidence and a knock-down proof. We are attracted to this man we call “Doubting Thomas,” because we see in him our twin—as his name suggests—a modern, rational, we might even say “scientific” person, who refuses to be duped into believing whatever others tell him.

But I want to suggest that this way of hearing today’s gospel text rather misses the point. Thomas is, in fact, nothing like the modern day, cool-headed, rational skeptic. Because, in the end, it is not Thomas’s doubt about God but rather his desire for God that determines who he is and what he represents for us. I want to suggest that there are two kinds of doubt, a doubt that leads to faith and a doubt that leads to unbelief. Thomas is, for us, the great exemplar of the doubt that leads to faith. Let me try to unpack these two kinds of doubt by drawing your attention again to what the text actually tells us about Thomas. The story of Thomas begins today, that is, one week after Easter. On Easter Sunday, last week, Jesus had put in a surprise evening appearance with the disciples. Apparently, they were all cowering in fear in an upper room, doors locked, when suddenly Jesus is in their midst. The very same one whom they had seen crucified and buried! Jesus shows them his scars, gives them his peace, commissions them to continue his work, breathes upon them the Holy Spirit, and then vanishes. It was quite a show. The disciples were duly impressed.

There was just one problem. One of their guys was missing. Which raises the question, where in the world was Thomas on Easter Sunday?! Had he overslept? Was he away on business? Perhaps his wife had said, let’s do church at home today, honey. I think that there is a better

explanation. Quite simply, Thomas did not know that it was Easter Sunday. Jesus had died on Friday, and that was all-too-obviously the end of the story.

Put that way, the strange thing is not that Thomas was absent from the upper room on Easter evening, but rather that any of the disciples were present. After all, they did not know it was Easter Sunday either. They did not expect resurrection any more than Thomas did. So why had they gathered together? Perhaps they thought, well, it's a bad deal that we missed the boat on the Jesus thing, but at least we've still got each other. Perhaps they had bought into the questionable idea, which sometimes floats around Greenville College, that community is somehow intrinsically valuable. "Don't worry about the truth, community is where it's at!"

But Thomas would have none of that. For Thomas, everything, everything in his life depended upon whether Jesus was in truth who he said he was. There was not one single aspect of his life which had not been taken captive by the astounding, unbelievably good news that Jesus had come to proclaim. Therefore, when Jesus was crucified, Thomas's life was destroyed. "His heart was with the lifeless body on the cross, and he could not bear to see the friends of Jesus or speak with those who had shared his hopes" (Dods).

There is something essential to faith that is represented by Thomas's absence on that first Easter evening. For there are worse things than not being in church. The person who wishes to believe in Jesus but, for whatever reason, cannot, is in fact much nearer to God than the complacent churchgoer who is content that there is really nothing at stake with the whole Jesus thing but nevertheless thinks it is beneficial to have a community, or to be perceived as an upright member of society, or to raise one's children in the company of nice, well-mannered people.

We may call both persons "doubters," but their modes of doubt could not be more fundamentally opposed. For there are two kinds of doubt. The doubt of Thomas is the doubt of one who wishes to believe, would give the whole world to be free from doubt, and will despair of life itself because he cannot believe. This is the first mark of the doubt that leads to faith—it is rooted in a more fundamental desire to believe. This kind of doubt leads to faith and life because this kind of doubt is, in fact, a form of prayer. On the other hand, there is the doubt of the cool-headed, detached skeptic. The skeptic cultivates his doubt, thrives on it, loves to disturb other less "enlightened" people with it, and is in fact irritated to have it challenged because it has become a part of his cherished identity. This is the kind of doubt that leads to unbelief and death.

Given our context, I would like to add a brief aside here to my fellow teachers and preachers. It has become a platitude of religious education that doubt is a part of faith, and this is true as far as it goes. It is indeed the case that part of our calling as teachers and preachers is to challenge our students and parishioners to deeper faithfulness, and this will inevitably provoke

doubt because it requires a deconstruction of superficial, comfortable, and idolatrous forms of belief. But, the mere fact that our students and parishioners doubt does not indicate that we are being faithful teachers and preachers. Everything depends upon the kind of doubt that our efforts engender. We must labor and pray such that our students and parishioners develop the doubt of Thomas, a doubt that is rooted in a more fundamental desire, a doubt that simply struggles to dare to believe that something as unfathomably wonderful as the truth we proclaim could possibly be true. And we must labor and pray such that our students and parishioners do not fall victim to the doubt that kills the desire for God and replaces a smug and complacent religiosity with an equally smug and complacent skepticism.

To return now to the story of Thomas. I have been claiming that the doubt of Thomas is an especially faithful kind of doubt. But how can we know this? After all, when the disciples who had been in the upper room told Thomas what they had seen, he did not buy it. Instead, he issued an ultimatum: "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." How is this different than the detached skepticism of Russell: "Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence"?

I think the difference is made obvious by the next verse. "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them." What a remarkable thing that Thomas was with the disciples again! In the midst of his doubt, he made sure to be with the little Christian community on the second Lord's Day. This is the clue to the nature of Thomas's doubt. He did not believe, but he wished to, and he did everything in his power to put himself in a position to be convinced otherwise. There is no suggestion that the disciples had any reason to suspect that Jesus would appear again, one week later, and yet Thomas wished to be with those persons who had claimed that their own unbelief had been overcome. That is the second mark of the doubt that leads to faith—it seeks to be convinced and puts itself in the way of conviction. And this is very different, again, from the doubt that leads to unbelief, a doubt that avoids like the plague any authentic fellowship with persons who claim to have been convinced otherwise.

And, as we know from the story, Thomas's desire to be convinced that the Christ was risen and is now alive is fulfilled. Jesus does appear again. And, immediately, Jesus offers himself to Thomas. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be unbelieving but believe." We imagine that at this point Thomas reaches out to touch Jesus' wounds. Artists have often depicted Thomas touching Jesus. Yet the text does not say that Thomas touched Jesus, and in fact the glaring omission suggests that he did not. Instead of reaching out to get his hard, empirical evidence, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" What a remarkable thing for Thomas to confess! He does not say, "Oh, you're really back," or "Okay, you got me." Instead, this doubting Thomas utters the single most exalted and supreme Christological confession in the entire gospel of John!

And this suggests a third and final mark of the doubt that leads to faith. Doubt that is rooted in the deepest and most profound desire to know God will, in God's time and through God's grace, be transformed into a faith that is every bit as deep and profound as the doubt that it replaces.

In other words, there is a proportion between authentic doubt and authentic faith. Because Thomas was possessed of the deepest yearning to believe in the risen Christ, he was also stricken with the deepest, most despairing, doubt. But also, because he was possessed of this deepest yearning, he was granted the most profound, most soaring vision of who the risen Christ really was for him and for the whole world.

This is why authentic doubt is a form of prayer, because authentic doubt is always a seeking after God and because prayer is just the name we give to our seeking after God. And therefore, if scripture is to be trusted, all authentic doubt is a doubt that leads to faith. Not because of who we are, but because of who God is. "For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Mt 7:8).

So, there are two kinds of doubt: the doubt that leads to faith and the doubt that leads to unbelief. And the doubt that leads to faith has three marks: it is rooted in a deep desire to believe, it persistently seeks to be convinced of the truth it desires, and, in God's time and by God's grace, it will be replaced with the unsurpassable hope and joy of authentic faith. This is the good news about authentic doubt.

And so we pray. Create in us, Father, hearts that desire you as Thomas did, so that, if we must doubt, we doubt you as Thomas did. And bring to us your wounded Son, in his many disguises, and breathe upon us your Holy Spirit, so that our unbelief may be transformed into the soaring faith of Thomas. Amen.