

By now I hope all of you know that good honest doubt is never an enemy to Jesus or to the life of faith. A bold, pursuing, “take no prisoners,” get-down-to-the-bottom-of-it-at-all-costs doubt is often a necessary step toward any kind of faith you can bet your life on. The trouble with doubt is not genuine doubt which spurs us on toward investigation, toward a renewed inquest into what is true—the only trouble with doubt is the counterfeit doubt, the “doubt in sheep’s clothing” which only conceals pride.

Jesus never looks down His nose upon those with honest doubts—He knows, in the end, He can work with and “save” those whose doubts propel them to pursue the truth. “A physician comes to heal the sick,” and if good honest doubt motivates people to go see the Physician, it’s very healthy. It’s necessary. If it provides a pseudo-intellectual cover for people who deep down believe they are plenty healthy, thank you, who are insulted by the suggestion they might need a Physician, then of course doubt only provides excuse for them to stay away. (“How could I possibly believe in Christ when the churches are so full of hypocrites?” So the Physician patiently waits for them, ever eager to heal, to restore, to save, to make new.)

The first of our lessons from the Fourth Gospel provides a bit of background as to what His apostle Thomas, (as in “Doubting Thomas”), one of the twelve, is really like. Jesus has just narrowly escaped out of Jerusalem with His life—they’re ready to kill Him. He gets the news His friend Lazarus is gravely ill. In order to show the glory of God in action, in order to allow His followers to grow in their trust, we heard Jesus propose they go right back into Bethany, two miles from the lair of the dragon, the capital, where Jesus is such a wanted man. There Jesus will confront death. “With all due respect, Lord,” say His followers, “Don’t You remember they just tried to stone You to death there? You want to do *what?*”

Jesus was not backing down; He needed to go to tend to Lazarus; He needed, as always, to obey the Father—regardless of the risk. “Let us go to Lazarus.” Out of all the twelve, it’s only Thomas, loyal Thomas, who concurs: “Alright then, guys. You heard Him. Let’s roll; so we die with Him.” It’s hard to tell how deep the others had already dug in their heels. Maybe they had already decided they were not going, period. Why go and die unnecessarily? But Thomas speaks up; “As you like, guys. But I am going with Jesus; if He’s going, I’m going. There’s nowhere else I want to be.” Somehow, perhaps as a result of Thomas’ single-mindedness to follow the Master, the twelve finally decide to chance it. On to Bethany, to Lazarus, they all go.

Apparently Thomas is not a naturally optimistic fellow. It’s true he looks ahead to their visit with Martha and Mary and Lazarus and in his own mind he envisions the most pessimistic possible outcome to their visit: “We’re all going to die!” Does your imagination sometimes work like that, if you let it?

Thomas was not blessed with an upbeat temperament. But surely some of you know what it’s like to be Thomas: to worry, to imagine the worst, to have to live thru and pray thru all manner of disaster lurking to strike down your children, your husband, your business, your future, your finances, your health, your dreams. You haven’t consciously chosen this approach toward the future, but the bad dreams keep coming in the dark of night; the negative outcomes which play out in your mind seem so much more

convincing, so much more likely, so much more vivid, than any sort of “happy ending” you might work to supply.

(But it’s not just the temperament of Thomas. I think there’s something wrong with any of us who do not look around, as children of God and residents of this world, unbothered by the misery and the uncertainty. The poverty, the violence, the entrenched evil in every corner of the world. The corruption of both our own political parties, of the United Nations. The price of oil, the leadership in Iran, our own arrogance and immorality. The estimated 300,000 Christians being starved and tortured and “re-educated” in North Korea alone. Do we not shudder when we recognize there is such evil afoot, evil beyond any power on earth ever to solve?)

Granted, Thomas was not an optimist. But he was loyal to his Lord—a far greater thing. One of the heroes of early English history—back in the 1200’s—was Simon de Montfort, who helped to establish the institution of Parliament. He fought and ultimately died for the principle of civil liberties for the people of England. He had a premonition of his death the night before he was killed in the battle of Evesham. He shared it with his friends, and one of his faithful friends, Hugh de Spencer spoke for all of them: “If you die, we have no wish to live.” Sure enough—by the time darkness had settled over the field of battle the next night, there lay the lifeless body of Simon de Montfort—surrounded by those of his followers, each one true to his word. Loyal in life, loyal to the end. [from *River of Life*, James Stewart, p 48]

Thomas was not about to let His Lord go on toward dark Jerusalem alone. In life or in death, Thomas wanted to stand and be counted with Jesus. Then Thomas is surely one of the good guys. One of the best. If history has intended to disparage this loyal servant by the nickname “Doubting Thomas,” I want no part of it.

Let’s fast forward to this second lesson, set just after Easter Sunday morning. The church was gathered together, huddled together, for worship. Ten of the twelve were there. We know why Judas was missing, but for some reason Thomas was missing also. We’re not told why. His Lord had been crucified, humiliated; dead, gone. Was Thomas brooding black depression back, dogging him? Had his sensitivity, his imagination gotten the better of him—he who so deeply understood the virtue of loyalty, yet had failed to stand with Jesus at the cross, in life and in death loyal to the end...

I suppose there have been less expectant Christian small group gatherings than that first one, but not by much. Jesus had lost. His ten followers were crushed, and feeling cowardly and unworthy and guilty and very scared on top of it all. Still, they gathered to be with each other in His name. What else would they do? Where else would they go?

There they were, Christ’s imperfect church, even back then. They expected little, their hearts were distracted, their loss heavy upon them. It must have felt more like a funeral service than a Worship Service. What words could there be at such a time? Can’t you just imagine Peter leading them, holding back bitter tears: “O LORD, You have been our refuge throughout all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or the earth and the world were born, from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God...” They continued in prayer; maybe they processed thru the heart-wrenching events of the last week.

Together there they expected nothing, together there they probably thought God would feel far, far away, since they assembled together that night mainly out of habit...because by now they had become people who got together to experience the love of God, to support one another, to encourage one another, as Jesus had led them and taught them to do. And as they did, the oddest thing happened.

You know the surprise, but it's still pretty amazing. The risen Christ, the living God, showed up among them. Right there in that room when they were feeling most sheepish, most abandoned, most lost. They thought they were meeting to begin to pick up the pieces of the wreckage, to maybe see if they might somehow salvage a few scraps from the disaster of the cross.

Now Thomas didn't know that he had missed Jesus, but Jesus sure noticed the empty place in the pew. Jesus sure missed Thomas. (So often I may think worship is all about me. How do I feel this morning? What's my busy schedule? What mood am I in? Do I think I'm going to get anything out of it? I'm sure Thomas had his reasons for staying away—perhaps he couldn't bear to meet his old friends now that Jesus, their Leader, was gone. Maybe it was going to take Thomas a little time before he felt he could show his face in public again. [Or maybe his family was visiting from out of town. Maybe there was a game scheduled every Sunday. Maybe he felt awkward, out of place. Maybe he would feel self-conscious if he had to get up before it was ended. Maybe he just didn't feel Jesus was very important, compared to his leisure time, his own time.]

In any case, there's that terse comment, that wry understatement at verse 24: "Thomas was not there when Jesus came." Can you imagine—Not there when Jesus came! Whatever the reason, the fact is Thomas missed the Lord. Jesus showed up, and Thomas missed Him! And he didn't even know it.

Whenever His Church gathers together for His sake, even two or three, the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord is present. I may not be prepared to notice; I may be preoccupied; I may not think it's very important; I may think church is for grandmothers and children; I may be feeling too independent or too unworthy. I may be here this morning and far too distracted those vacation Sundays in July. However I may be feeling about the matter, the Holy Spirit is present, eager to meet me, to move me, to shape me, to convict me, to encourage and strengthen me in every Worship Service. I may not always expect it, I may not always feel up to it; I may sometimes even forget what essentially happens when Christ's followers, His Church, you and I, gather together. I may not even notice what I am missing. But Jesus notices when I am missing. How very sad: "Thomas was not there when Jesus came."

However, the next day, going about his business in Jerusalem, a strange thing happens to Thomas. Peter and John have tracked him down, with a strange look in their eyes and a crazy story on their lips. "Thomas—I can't believe you weren't there with us last night! You wouldn't believe it—the Master is alive! He came among us! There He was, big as Life—we have seen the Lord!" They couldn't be more excited—and how do you suppose their excitement moved Thomas, feeling distant as he did? (Trick question...)

I think so too. The same way the excitement of His friends telling you about Jesus appealed to you, way back when. The same way it moved you, when your friend was inviting you to come back, to check out some amazing church, to join this Bible study, to come on a retreat for a weekend. Their excitement drives you further away,

does it not? When you're not yet ready, when you're trying to persist in the denial that your life under your management is the best it can be, when you're feeling distracted or pressured or as if the state of your life is someone else's fault—in short, when pride still has you blind and stupid and stubborn about it—then the very excitement of a messenger of the gospel of the love of God and the risen Christ Jesus trying to get thru to you is enough to make you wanna run far, far away from them—at least, you want to close the door in their face or hope they be quiet. (Did any of you ever go thru that phase, or have you just always just been crazy about Jesus? Perfectly loyal from the beginning?)

(That hostility is always a clue, isn't it. An honest doubter, anyone genuinely seeking the truth, does not treat you with animosity when you offer to lead them into the Truth. In fact they would welcome you. The edge, the anger, reveals their own internal civil war, how hard they are battling to keep convincing themselves that their pride is a virtue, not the greatest and most dangerous obstacle to their welfare.)

So we can cut Thomas a little slack. He lashes out at his best friends: “Don't even go there with me...You have no right to those grins on your faces. Can't you see, I'm in no mood to be trifled with. Don't do this, don't mess with my mind like this. I'm not buying your load. It's a stupid story. Until I touch the wounds in His hands, His side, I will never believe it. Now get away from me and leave me alone!”

Thomas' unbelief, in that moment, had nothing to do with his intellect or with rationality. Had he been totally rational, he would have paused, considered the source of this idle tale, and at the very least consented to go interrogate some of the other supposed witnesses to check it out. At that moment, given his emotions and his heart, he could not bear to do that. [I am convinced, paradoxically, the mind, the brain, is almost never the cause of unbelief. Many of the most brilliant scientists, intellectuals, philosophers since the time of Jesus have investigated the evidence and have come to agree with Thomas, in the end. Pride is the cause of unbelief; our heart attitude, our spiritual desire to remain “in control,” our self-image of ourselves as independent and competent are what prevent our minds from ever being fair with the evidence.]

It had been a very bad day for Thomas; maybe we can leave it at that. His most trusted friends bring him news too good to be true, too mocking to his misery. He rejects them. He wants no part of them.

It may be that Thomas was having a bad day for up to a week. The Church met again the next Sunday—and by then Thomas was there with them. What had changed for him? Perhaps his emotional pain let up a bit. Maybe not; maybe he just powered thru it. Maybe he was trying to go to sleep that night, and he probed deeper. “What if they were right—what if the delusion were somehow true—what if it's I who is persisting in the wrong?” “Why otherwise would my friends, His friends, be doing this to me?” “Didn't Jesus say some cryptic things about His End in Jerusalem, about “on the third day?” “Maybe I'm not seeing the whole picture. He always did seem to have one more surprise up His sleeve; He was one step ahead...But no...This would be too much. It's not possible. But what if...?” We don't know how long Thomas persisted in his bad day—we do know that a week later there he was, back worshiping, meeting, with the others who had loved Jesus.

I'm sure every one of us can identify some Thomases around us who are still in the midst of living out a bad day. This kind of bad day can last for weeks, years, decades—a lifetime. Surely you have known a Thomas who once knew Jesus, or was at

least introduced to Him when she used to have a part in His Church. (She would admit—Jesus never hurt or disappointed her.) You have a friend who has grown world-weary, who is living in the pain of disappointment and disillusionment—just as His friends found Thomas that next Monday morning. A friend whose spiritual concrete has apparently hardened: “You won’t fool me with your good cheer, your idle tale of the living God whose Spirit has indwelt you and healed you and changed you and made such a difference in your life. I’m a serious person, far too wise and well-educated to be taken in by what you religious people have bought into. You and your silly little church!”

It’s a good thing Jesus’ friends cut Thomas some slack. Although his disbelief had to be an insult to the bearers of the good news, they did not disinvite him—when finally he was ready to come back, they welcomed him. A week later, a year later. “Of course, Thomas, come in, come in. Here’s your seat. It’s great to see you again...” Maybe it’s a good thing for us to cut the Thomases in our lives some slack. They, too, have their burdens to bear, their pain to process. Maybe they, like Thomas, have felt betrayed; maybe even by Christ’s Church. Maybe they’d found it petty and irrelevant. Perhaps they think God Himself has shortchanged them. So we keep bearing witness, we keep being patient as Jesus is patient.

It’s a good thing they cut Thomas some slack, and not just for Thomas’ sake. It’s a good thing for every Thomas. Are you and I not Thomas? Have we not taken the long way Home, chosen first to detour to the far country? Have we not insulted our Lord and His friends? Have we not, like Thomas, endured our own “very bad days” of going our own way, keeping away from Christ and His Church, the sure place His Spirit will reach out to us and meet us? Have we not lived as if we knew better, decided better, lived better on our own, apart from “having to” submit to the will and Person of God? Do we not still play “poor me,” “hard to get,” “hard of hearing” sometimes?

Of course we do. The good news is that we find what happened for Thomas happens for us. And not because we are so repentant, so contrite, so faithful finally to commit to worship and support the Church. Not because we pursue the evidence or overcome our pride or deign to receive Him into our lives.

But because Jesus loves us. He knows our hurt, our past, our old wounds and scars; He knows the causes of our absence and alienation. Just as He noticed Thomas missing; just as He came to Thomas when Thomas returned. Thomas needed to place his hands in the wounds of His Lord or he would not believe: and what did Jesus offer? Exactly, precisely that: “Reach your finger here; reach your hand here, into My side: be untrusting no longer, but trust in Me!” [v 27]

The Holy Spirit of Jesus keeps coming for you, and for all those other Thomases still in the middle of living out their very bad day. The Holy Spirit keeps “cutting us slack”—it’s called divine mercy—and keeps coming to meet us (divine grace); keeps entering into our honest doubts, our painful places, keeps offering to meet every Thomas missing from Worship, missing out on Life, in the most personal ways; the ways which we will individually comprehend.

I was Thomas for a few years. I had known Jesus and His love; I had tried to follow and obey Him. Then I lit out to seek my own fortune, my own way—first I drifted away from His church, His people gathering together, then effectively away from Him and His guidance. Reluctantly, He let me go away. (I had left Him no choice.) Even when I came limping back again, still I came on my own terms, my head held high, at

least sort of. “OK, my way has failed, Jesus. I gotta admit that. So please reveal Yourself to me again. Please receive me back again. Only remember I hate this kind of church, I can’t stand that kind of preaching, I’d never survive with this sort of people...” (Hard to imagine such arrogance from one who had failed so undeniably and totally—as if I got to dictate the terms of my surrender.) “Unless I reach my hands into His side...”

But I promise you, even my attitude of arrogance was nothing compared to the irresistible love of God shown that Thomas—me—thru the pursuing Spirit of the risen Christ and His worshiping church. Jesus led me into the one church in a thousand I could have appreciated. He accommodated Himself to meet me—not anyone else—in the specific, personal ways I needed at that time after all the particular darkness I had put myself thru. He revealed Himself to me so unmistakably, so lovingly, so personally. He still does, and now thru many of you. (Thanks be to God!)

The point is not in the end about our doubting or our trusting, our arrogance or our loyalty. Jesus keeps coming for us, keeps accommodating to meet us, to welcome us Home, to love us. The Holy Spirit of Jesus keeps turning our honest doubt into faith; our untrust into trust. Our darkness into Light, our death into Life.

Thank You, Thank You, Jesus! My Lord and my God!

John 11:16

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

John 20:19-20; 24-29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

