

## “Got Doubt?”

I.

Got doubt? Thomas did –and he has never lived it down. You might think that 2,000 years would be long enough to let bygones be bygones –but I guess that is not the way we do things around here. Every single year, on the Sunday after Easter—when all the visitors have gone home, when things are kind of quiet, when we have this church to ourselves again—on the Sunday after Easter, the lectionary always drags out “Doubting Thomas” for his annual flogging. In this situation, the preacher’s task seems pretty clear: Take this doubter, and make an example out of him. He didn’t believe! Thomas is bad! Don’t be like Thomas!

This year, a lot of preachers in Des Moines may double down on that theme. After all, the atheists just left town. The American Atheists National Convention brought some 700 proud and professed non-believers to the Embassy Suites downtown, just across the river from my place. I could see atheists from my house! Media-savvy atheists. Their president generated a lot of attention by announcing their intention of recruiting the “church pew atheists” –those of you sitting out there this morning who may show up for church but who secretly suspect that there is no God.<sup>1</sup> Consider yourself warned: the atheists are out to get you! They’ve got designs on your doubt. They intend to exploit it.

So it seems like a good morning to preach against the dangers of doubt. Is that what I should do? I’m not really sure. Let’s just try this and see where it goes.

We get this text every single year, so the story should sound familiar. Easter evening finds the disciples of Jesus in an upper room, huddling behind locked doors, hiding from the Roman authorities. Crazy rumors fill the air: an empty tomb, a missing body, Mary Magdalene’s wild story about seeing Jesus alive earlier that day. And even as they struggle to sort all of this out, the disciples have every reason to think that the people who crucified their rabbi will soon come looking for them. They keep a close eye on the door. Every time the stairs creak, their hearts skip a beat.

But then it happens. In that locked, cramped, crowded little room, Jesus suddenly shows up. He stands in the midst of them, speaking peace. He shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. The Crucified One is risen. The disciples see it with their own eyes.

Well, most of the disciples see it. Not Thomas. Thomas couldn’t make it on that first Easter evening. John’s Gospel never does tell us why: maybe he had to put in an appearance at his nephew’s bar-mitzvah; maybe he had a dentist’s appointment. Maybe he just wanted to be alone.

For whatever reason, he missed it. And when the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen Jesus—when they recount their wild and wildly implausible story—Thomas has the nerve to sound a little skeptical. *"Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

Got doubt? Thomas did. And he has never yet lived it down.

II.

But here is the thing about Thomas: He reminds me of somebody I know. He kind of reminds me...of me. Don't let this black gown fool you. I have got my doubts. I may have more than my fair share.

When I read some of the more shocking portions of the Bible—stories of terrible violence and genocide, what Phyllis Trible calls the "texts of terror"<sup>2</sup>—I wonder why the "still speaking" God would choose to speak to us through such an appalling book. When I look around at the church, and consider just how much time we tend to waste in petty pretentious trivia and gossip, I wonder why God would ever want to be associated with such a badly broken institution. When I see the suffering and evil at work in this world, I wonder why God would ever allow such horrendous things to take place. When I still seem to have the same old struggles, year after year after year, I wonder if God is really at work in my life; I wonder if there really is any such thing as spiritual growth. When I pray, I wonder if anyone is really listening.

Got doubt? You bet I do. And I suspect I'm not the only one. "Doubting" Thomas has got a whole lot of company.

III.

But there is something strange about this story—something we often overlook. We may blame Thomas for his doubt, but Jesus does not. Jesus does not seem to mind so much. A week goes by and then Jesus returns to that upper room. It is pretty much a repeat performance, but this time *all* of the disciples are present and accounted for. We might expect the risen Christ to scold Thomas, to rebuke him for his doubts, to kick him out of that upper room and revoke his apostolic credentials. But Jesus does no such thing. He simply says this: *"Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting and believe."*

And then what does Thomas say in response? *"My Lord and my God."*

This is a major moment, maybe the climax of John's entire Gospel. All through the story, John keeps hammering away at this one idea: When it comes to Jesus, people just don't get it. They call him a rabbi, a prophet, a miracle worker. They

try to make him a king. But nobody knows who Jesus really is. All through the Gospel according to John, nobody gets it...until this moment. Until Thomas speaks these words: *"My Lord and my God."*

Finally somebody gets it. These words of Thomas are a profound confession of faith –the fullest such confession in all of John's Gospel. And where do we find it? On the lips of the one who struggles with doubt.<sup>3</sup> *Thomas* gets it.

Maybe we have been too hard on him. Maybe doubt isn't such a bad thing after all.

IV.

We tend to talk about faith and doubt as if they were mutually exclusive –if you really have faith then you won't have any doubts; if you have any doubts, then you obviously do not have faith. But Thomas could tell you that it just ain't so. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; doubt is a crucial component of faith. It is normal and it is necessary.

Everyone experiences doubt –and I do mean everyone. About three years ago, a little book of Mother Teresa's correspondence was published –letters she had written over the course of 60 plus years, letters she never expected to see the light of day.<sup>4</sup> The book got a lot of attention because in some of these letters she expressed doubts –great big existential doubts. Writing to a friend she said, *"Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear..."*<sup>5</sup>

Strong stuff. People were amazed that Mother Teresa—who spent her life caring for lepers, who exemplifies sainthood for so many people—they were amazed that Mother Teresa, of all people, could ever have such doubts.

I was amazed that they were amazed.

Had they never read back in the Book of Genesis about Jacob, who wrestled all night long in order to find a blessing? Had they never listened to Job questioning God, wondering if the judge of all the earth will do right? Have they never encountered the psalmist, crying out of the depths, struggling through the dark night of the soul? Had they never heard Jesus cry from the cross –alone, abandoned, forsaken by God?

Mother Teresa had doubts? Of course she did. How do you think she got to be Mother Teresa?

In the life of faith, doubt is normal and necessary. It is a feature, not a bug. And sometimes, strangely, doubt can even be a gift from God. If we will ever be the people God calls us to be, we need to let doubt do its deep work within us. If we will ever be the church God knows we can be, we need to embrace all who doubt, share our doubts with each other, struggle together until we start to hear what our doubts are trying to tell us. It just might be the truth that will set us free.

Got doubt? Good for you. And welcome home.

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<sup>1</sup> See Marc Hansen's *Des Moines Register* column for April 22 2011. Available: <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20110423/NEWS03/104230308/-1/PREPS/Hansen-Atheists-town-Scriptural-spats-heat-up>

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. (London, SCM: 2002).

<sup>3</sup> "[T]he last word spoken by a disciple in the Gospel is an expression of full Christian faith." Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*. The Anchor Bible. Volume 29A. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), p.1032,

<sup>4</sup> *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith." *Time*. August 23, 2007. Available: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html>