

Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-22
John 20:19-31

Poor old Doubting Thomas. He will be forever known as Doubting Thomas. But he is also known as St. Thomas. Doubting Thomas a saint? Which is he? He must have been an interesting character!

There is doubting Thomas, as most of us probably know him. Our text says that on Easter night the disciples were gathered together when Jesus came to them, and clarifies later that Thomas was not with them. Maybe he was out looking for a job, now that the Jesus movement came to an unexpected and abrupt end. Maybe he was at the local bar, trying to forget the pain. Or, maybe he just wanted to be alone. We really do not know. We just know that he happened not to be with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. At any rate, the disciples run into Thomas and with excitement, declared "You are not going to guess who we saw!" And he doesn't. Of course he is not going to guess Jesus. Thomas was in the Garden of Gethsemane when the soldiers dragged Jesus away. He had seen Jesus nailed to the cross and seen him die. Jesus was dead and that's all there was to it. Ever since, he has gone by the moniker "Doubting Thomas."

However, he is also known as St. Thomas. Church tradition tells us that after Thomas was convinced of Jesus' resurrection, he headed farther than any other apostle, to share the good news in India. To this day, Thomasite churches exist in India, tracing their heritage back to the evangelistic activity by Thomas. Do we forget how committed Thomas was to Jesus? Earlier in John's gospel, there is a scene where Jesus is talking to his disciples about returning to Judea, the very place where the crowds had almost stoned him on their last visit. While some of the disciples advised

caution, Thomas is quoted as saying, "Let us all go, that we might die with him." Quite gutsy for a doubting Thomas.

We may identify more with the doubting Thomas, than with Saint Thomas. Very few of us think of ourselves as saints. Evidently back where I grew up, a lot of people did not think I was a saint, for they keep telling me, "I never thought you'd be a preacher!" We may not think of ourselves as saints for we may very well have our doubts, our doubts about the existence of God, our doubts about the resurrection. Our doubts about the validity of God's Word, Jesus Christ. We look at ourselves and are troubled by our doubts, by our lack of faith. We may admire people who seem to have a strong, rock solid, faith. We wish that we could be like those whose faith seems so steadfast. There are reasons we have doubt. We are not born doubters. The more we have lived, the more pain we have endured, the more advertisements we've heard, the more promises we hear from our politicians, the more times we have been deceived, the more our doubts grow. Doubts can protect us, such as when we get that email from someone in Africa that asks for our help in transferring money and promise to pay us for our trouble. If we will help them transfer their 120 million dollars into a US bank through our bank account, they will give us a ten percent fee, \$12 million. All we have to do is give them our bank account numbers and our social security number. That is one time our doubt will serve us well. Doubt can protect us. But it can also trouble us.

Faith lies on a continuum. There are those whose faith is rock solid, and those whose faith is on quick sand. It is like hearing loss. There are those who have very good hearing. There are those who are very deaf. My father was so deaf he couldn't hear a jet plane if stood nearby. He could feel the vibrations of the sound, but he could not hear

one. He had a deaf friend who could not hear thing, but he could hear jets flying high over him. I'm losing my hearing due to presbycusis. That is not a Presbyterian disease, but hearing loss due to aging. Boy I hate to admit that! My loss is a slight one, but one that will need help soon. Our faith may move from one end of the continuum to the other end from day to day. Some days we believe. Some days we doubt. Like I say, it can rest on shaky ground.

Notice that Jesus did not condemn Thomas for his lack of faith. Yes, Jesus praised those who believed without seeing the risen Lord, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" As one commentator suggests, the emphasis is on Jesus' invitation to see and believe, not on castigating Thomas. Let's also remember that Thomas did not have the advantage the other disciples had. They DID see the risen Lord. Also when Mary Magdalene saw the risen Lord, as we read in last week's John reading, she went and told the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord. But nothing comes of it. There is nothing recorded about how they responded to Mary's witness, which seems to indicate that they did not believe her. More than likely, they had their doubts.

In spite of doubts, the church continues. Paul Tillich said, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith." The church in Europe has been on a decline much longer than it has been here in the United States. For many, the church is only there for baptisms and funerals. For weddings in much of Europe to be legal, there has to be a civic ceremony. A religious ceremony is not enough. In the midst of that, there has been the organic growth of ecumenical gatherings called the "Thomas Mass." Starting in Helsinki in 1988, ministers, artists, musicians, and civic leaders worked

together to create a prayerful service that would again fill their cathedral, not with departed churchgoers, but with doubters, seekers, searchers, and believers alike. They named the services after Thomas “the Doubter.” It immediately began to spread across Europe, and services are prayerful and participatory, rather than passive. People engage with God at prayer stations, painting walls, and creative expressions of the sacraments. Even in the midst of doubt, these worshipers can worship God. A church made up of doubters.

Could it be we need our doubts? The author Anne Lamott, wrote, “The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty.” The great theologian Paul Tillich wrote: “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” We are finite Being finite, we cannot know everything about the infinite. Being creature means we cannot know everything about the creator. Thus in thinking about the creator, the infinite, uncertainty is present. It is this doubt, this uncertainty, that helps us grow in our faith. The great preacher Frederick Buechner once said, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

All authority and power and dominion
to the name that is above all names—
Jesus Christ our Lord—
now and in the age to come. **Amen.**