

The disciple with a bad reputation

May 1st 2022 - Fairview Church

John 20:24-29

As a child, one of my earliest memories was curling up with a book. And not just any book, but a book I'm sure I had my parents read to me hundreds of times...Mr. Pine's Purple House. I loved that book about a man who lived in a white house with 50 other white houses in his neighborhood. One day he decides to do something different and ends up painting his white house purple so that his house is unique. I am convinced that the book is both responsible for my inability to conform to expectations as well as my deep love of reading!

I am told that I was reading before the age of 3 and by the second grade was reading and comprehending at a college level. I am part of the fence generation, one that grew up seeking answers from encyclopedias as a kid and the internet as an adult. I was the kid who would ride to the library and return home with a giant stack of books. Looking back at some of the stuff I was reading, I think the librarians should have curbed my enthusiasm a bit! Lest you think that this love of reading made me a stellar student, let me quickly correct that notion. I was an average student, a B and C+ student with the occasional A in gym and English.

I have never been one to enjoy learning a set curriculum, and I have never mastered coloring inside the lines to a predesigned scheme. That made me a terrible high school student where I was supposed to learn what they were saying and spit it back out in an acceptable format. All of my close friends were straight A students who would continually tease me to play by the rules and I would get better grades. It wasn't until college and then seminary, that I became that academic student with high grades. That was because finally I was able to explore and study anything and everything I was interested in. That made for a very varied college transcript, but once I found my area, nothing but A's adorned my transcript. Once I discover something that I'm interested in, like the Enneagram or gardening, I will study it obsessively, put myself in situations where I can experience it and find others who are interested in the same stuff I am.

Some of us are wired like that. With a desire to learn, but not in a traditional way. My husband and eldest daughter learn best orally and through tactile measures; but sitting at a desk and reading for hours kills their spirit. I did ¾ of my Master of Divinity sitting in coffee shops and at my desk at home alone.

Others prefer being on campus, surrounded by people, in the room as the action/teaching happens. One way of learning or seeking answers is not better than the other.

Here we are, the second Sunday after Easter. Last week I spoke of Hope and Resurrection and liminal space, this week I'm going to speak about faith and doubt. I have heard from folks here about the transition, the feeling of unsettledness and the wondering what is next. It feels appropriate to look at this passage in John because we can probably easily imagine what the disciples were feeling this week after Easter, which is where our Scripture from today is located. Confused. Scared. Disoriented. Not sure what the next step is. Everything they had thought to be true about Jesus has now been thrown into chaos and they are paralyzed. Most of them had seen Jesus resurrected already, thanks to the women at the tomb and Jesus showing up in the room where they were hiding. Most of them, except one disciple. Thomas.

The Scripture reading this morning tells us that Thomas had already missed the first sighting of Jesus. Perhaps in the grief and aftermath of the crucifixion, Thomas needed a break from the group, perhaps he was out getting food, we don't know why he was missing that day. So of course, when he returns and hears

the story of Jesus appearing, he is caught off guard and is a little skeptical. He wants proof, tangible proof that the man he followed for the last 3 years, the man he believed was the Christ, is really back amongst the living, back from the dead.

From the little we know about Thomas, we know that he was a builder, an architect and carpenter. Someone who worked with his hands and showed physical proof of his work. And we often forget that he was also brave and questioning before this particular pivotal moment in Scripture. In John 11, when the disciples were all trying to talk Jesus out of going to Judea for fear of death, Thomas was the disciple who spoke up saying, Let us also go so we may die with him! When Jesus was prophesying about leaving and going to prepare a place for them in John 14, the other disciples were silent. But not Thomas, who asked, Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? This is who Thomas is. He is a questioner, someone who wonders, seeks to learn and is looking for answers from Jesus.

Yet it is in verse 27 where we have cast Thomas forever, as doubting Thomas. A negative characterization of a man who lived his life looking for answers. Jesus has reappeared for the second time in a locked room where the disciples were huddled. Jesus' first words are Peace be with you. And then an invitation to

Thomas, not a condemnation, to see and touch his wounds. There is no record that Thomas actually did so, but Thomas' response is a fervent acknowledgment that Jesus is the Christ.

It is fascinating to me that one moment of a person's life can be so defining. We don't call Peter, Denying Peter, yet Doubting Thomas has stood through the ages and it has mostly been through a negative lens. Verse 29 seems to cement that negative feeling in the way Jesus speaks of the faith of those who have seen Him in person as opposed to those who will come to faith after He returns to heaven. And that is one way to look at it. However, there is another way to interpret this verse. And that is simply that within several decades, all who lived to see Jesus in the flesh would have died, either by martyrdom or old age. Jesus, in this verse, gives us a glimpse of the eternal truth that Christianity was here to stay. His life and ministry were not simply a 3 year aberration, but an abiding faith that would withstand persecution and the test of time. We are the living testament of those words in verse 29, we have not seen, but we believe.

In some traditions and teaching, doubt as a person of faith is akin to having weak faith. You need to pray harder, read the bible more in order to cast away any semblance of a doubting faith. You are made to feel guilty that you are troubled

by certain passages of the bible, or theological interpretations or quite frankly how God is moving in a world that seems so fragile and broken.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and author has said this about doubt:

“Doubt often brings me to poke at what I believe, and when it topples, I realize that was an idol. And so doubt and disillusionment have been the divine gifts that have led me deeper into who God is.”

Faith is not about having all the answers. Faith is not the absence of doubt but trusting God in spite of your doubt. Faith is getting up and leaving the locked room and walking into the unknown future unafraid of what might come next.

Thomas walked out of that room and became the first missionary to India, spending years telling people about Jesus. And it is speculated that he died as a martyr, a spear wound to his side by an angry tribe.

I deeply admire those Christians whose faith is steadfast and unwavering despite everything they encounter; some of us need tattoos to remind us daily of our faith. Some of us sitting in this church are wired like Thomas, like me, wondering, questioning, listening and sometimes impulsively saying ***Let's go even if we may***

die. We are not satisfied with the say so of others, but we long to experience Jesus ourselves.

We are living in a world that is increasingly Post Christian, Pew research tells us that most people under the age of 40 no longer believe in the church and institutional faith. But they are longing for something. They are the Thomas generation, they don't want to be told about faith and Jesus, they want to experience it. Live it. See it worked out in the lives of those who claim to be Jesus followers. They crave authenticity, community, justice, change, welcome and love. They want to taste it, hear it, feel it. No longer are they content to show up Sunday morning for an hour of spiritual teaching, but they want what Thomas wanted...a personal encounter with Jesus. We are now living in a world that overloads us with information and it takes a lot of time and energy to sort through what is true and what is false. If we are not people who question, have hard conversations, who take time to discern and to measure what we are being told to believe against the actual truth and character of God, we will lose our way. Thomas gives us an example of what it means to be both faithful and discerning.

We don't get to be in the room with Jesus, we don't get to touch His wounds for ourselves. But we have something the disciples didn't have, the saints that went before us and the words of Jesus captured in Scripture.

We have a roadmap of faith, how to live in such a way that others can see God in and through us. We can welcome the stranger, give voice to those whose voices are being unheard, we can learn to listen, to advocate and to call out injustice and untruth in this world. We can feed the hungry, clothe the naked and love radically. It will take the courage of Thomas to speak up when we don't understand or when the way of faith calls us into uncomfortable places.

All of us need to be like Thomas when he encountered the risen Christ. We need to be transformed by our relationship with Jesus, then walk out these doors and live and serve in such a way that all who meet us see God. This is the good news of Easter, Jesus is risen and through us the world can know Him.

Amen.

Benediction:

“Doubting Thomas” should really be renamed as Honest Thomas or realistic Thomas or even Brave Thomas. It is OK to question and to doubt. But we cannot let doubt paralyze us, but rather, let it transform us. Fredrick Beuchner once wrote, **Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.** May you go this week and whether you doubt or not, let us be reminded that we serve a Risen Lord and our faith needs to be active and moving. May we be a people who live into the calling of being good neighbours. So go and live like you just walked out of the locked room with the disciples after seeing Jesus...and live so that others may see Christ in you.

Amen.