

2 Easter B 2021

John 20:19-31

What would he make of us,
If he were catapulted into our midst?
What would Thomas the Apostle –
Whose nickname was not actually “doubting,”
But “the twin” –
What would he think if he arrived here and now
And heard us talking
About the way we experience
The dramatic, or tedious, inexplicable events of our lives?

A few years ago we were talking about “truthiness,”
And then there were “alternative facts,”
And “fake news,”
And now, all around us,
We hear conspiracists and doubters
Telling us to “do your research”
And to “dig deep”
In order to find for ourselves
Evidence that might persuade us
That a big lie is really a hidden truth.

Trust is in short supply;
We don't believe each other,
And we've lost the capacity to integrate new facts,
And surprises,
Into our thinking,
Especially if it means change.

And yet here we are,
A community who have given our hearts away
To the truth of Jesus alive and active here and now –
A story that defies scientific explanation,
A story that since the beginning
Has been described,
By the gospel writers themselves,
as an idle tale,
Or so frightening that it can't be told,
or suspected as a fraud,
or mistrusted by those, like Thomas,
who need physical evidence
to trust the newness and surprise
that might bring radical change –

to us, and to the world.
This story, the story of Jesus
freed from death and the tomb,
Bearing the marks of his death
Even in his risen life,
This story of Jesus
Encountering his best friends,
And leading them from sorrow to amazement
To transformative joy,
This story demands our trust.

It does not ask that we let go our doubts;
It invites us to enter into faith.

There is nothing wrong with doubt,
And in fact this story in the original
Doesn't use the word doubt.
It talks about faithlessness
Giving way to faith.
What Jesus says to Thomas could be,
Don't be faithless, be faithful,
Or, if you prefer,
Don't be disbelieving, be believing,
Or you could say,
Don't be trustless, be trusting.
Just don't use the word doubt,
Because it isn't there.

And actually there is nothing wrong with doubt.
You can have doubts, and be faithful.

We're afraid of doubt,
And we don't need to be.
Doubt is a very natural function of the inquiring mind.
It means, at its roots,
To keep on being of two minds about something.
That's hard for us,
In a world increasingly polarized,
Increasingly insistent on instant and unchanging answers,
Anxious about being right.

There isn't much room for doubt
In a world like ours,
And I think I think that's too bad.
Because if doubt means being of two minds,
Then it means weighing alternatives,

Wondering about things,
Asking how something can be so,
Puzzling it over.
It means learning through exploring,
As a baby does playing peekaboo,
As a teenager does trying out new behaviors,
As a journalist does in saying,
Trust, but verify,
As a scientist does, in careful and courageous research.
As a faithful Christian does,
In questioning the will and wisdom,
And even goodness of God,
In times of anguish,
In dry seasons.
In times of doubt.

But is this what Thomas is doing,
When he insists
That he needs to see and touch the wounds of Jesus?

This is not a story about doubt,
About being of two minds.
This is a story about faith,
And no faith,
And the journey from no faith
To faith.

After the death of Jesus,
The disciples are bereft, hiding and fearful.
Jesus, mysteriously,
Is among them,
Absolutely real and true.
He inspires them,
Proclaims the peace that surrounds us in the presence of God.
And they are filled with joy,
Joy that overflows from us in the presence of God.

Thomas is not present.
He misses the moment;
He's left out of the experience.
But I don't know if his problem is doubt.
He doesn't say, I'm of two minds about this:
On the one hand,
I want it to be true,
On the other hand,
I think it's impossible.

Asking questions,
Wondering,
That's not what he's doing.

He's been a questioner all along the way,
But now, instead of questioning, he demands.
I need to see him and touch him
In order to know it's really Jesus.
He needs him to be the same.
He's asking for something that Jesus is not offering.
Jesus comes breathing peace
And bringing joy,
And Thomas asks for evidence instead,
Evidence that things are still the same,
When in fact everything has changed.
Thomas is not doubting, he's demanding.
He wants Jesus to be who he was.

But Jesus is, and is not,
Who he was.
He bears the marks of his death,
But he is transformed into life itself.
It takes faith to see that.
Doubts don't get in the way of seeing –
Only faithlessness does.

Think about the story of Easter morning.
When Mary Magdalene encountered Jesus
In the garden,
She had no idea who he was.
He was not the same.
But he called her by her name,
And she recognized him,
Not by how he looked,
But by reconnecting to the relationship they had shared,
A relationship now transformed.
She is the first to understand,
And Thomas is the last.
Both witnesses matter.

When Thomas demands to see
That Jesus is the same,
Jesus responds, don't be faithless.
Look beyond your expectations,
Maybe your hurt and isolation.
Accept the possibility

That though your demands may not be met,
You will receive a gift.
You may have doubts,
But don't be faithless.

Faithless living is a dead end;
It's a life where we don't believe things can change,
Where we insist that there is nothing more than what we know,
Where we stick to old habits and patterns
Because we think what we know must be better
Than the unknown.
It's a life where we turn away from a precious surprise
Because we're sure our needs can only be met one way,
Even if that way isn't all that satisfactory.

That's the faithlessness of Thomas
Until he came to faith.
That's the faithlessness of any of us
When we refuse to change,
To meet a challenge,
To move out into a new and unknown future.

It's a faithlessness that keeps us stuck
In a world where we chafe under the ways things are,
But fail to seek change.
We tolerate injustice,
Turn our backs on hope,
Look for little ways to escape
Into a peace and quiet that promises nothing.

Faithlessness is a dead end.
God's invitation is to be faithful.
The future is unknown,
But because God is already in it,
It will be good.
Faithful living is living in the knowledge that this is true.

Like Thomas
We will continue to make mistakes,
Some embarrassing,
Some painful,
Some tragic,
But with God we will always,
Everywhere,
No matter what,
Receive welcome and forgiveness.

Faithful living is living in the knowledge that this is true.

Though the earth is spoiled
And violence seems endless
And disease ravages the entire world
We have everything we need,
Like Mary Magdalene, and Thomas too,
To work as God's partners
Towards a better future.

Jesus is among us,
Full of life,
Still showing the marks of his death.

You can have doubts about this.
You can wonder,
How can this be?
And still, you can live in its power.

Don't be faithless,
Be faithful.
Trust this truth.