

LOVE EMBRACING OUR DOUBTS

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John 20:19-29

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It's Easter Sunday. Well, at least an Easter Sunday, because Easter is a season, a long season, actually, to celebrate resurrection, creation, and new life for a couple of months each spring. This season starts on Easter Sunday and continues with 7 more Easter Sundays, all the way until Pentecost. So, it's Easter Sunday even today. More importantly, it's Easter Sunday in our scripture reading. This scenario in John 20:19-29 is the evening of that first Easter Sunday. So, let's go back to Easter morning in John's Gospel. Mary – or Mary and some of the women, in the other Gospels - has visited the tomb of Jesus, and found it empty. Well, except for a couple of angels and some linen cloths. Might seem pretty dramatic, but the main drama is that Jesus' body is missing. Mary runs to get help from Simon Peter & John, who are equally confused when they see the empty tomb, but head back home anyway. Mary sticks around, probably planning to have a good cry and then see if she can figure out where Jesus' body is. Who has stolen it? Where have they taken it? She's not about to give up on the opportunity to care, with love, one last time, for the body of her beloved Master, now dead. But then, she encounters what she thinks is a gardener and turns out to be the Risen Christ. She recognizes him when he calls her by name. She rejoices and wants to give him a hug, but Jesus won't let her touch his hands or hug his body, he says because he hasn't yet ascended to heaven. That's fine with Mary – she is so excited that she runs back to tell the men that she has seen and talked with Jesus. That's Easter morning. And so now it's Easter evening, as today's scripture begins.

John 20:19-25

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. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This is a beautiful Easter story. Jesus arrives into the midst of fear and confusion, and offers his very self to help the frightened disciples begin to believe and understand the importance of his resurrection. He comes into their midst bearing words of peace for their fears and offering comfort for their confusion, but they still seem to need more. He shows them his hands where the nails had pierced him, his side where the sword had speared him. And in seeing him, whatever form the Risen Christ was taking, the disciples rejoiced and then receive yet another blessing and a commission to go forth into the world to serve as Jesus had served, and to take the Holy Spirit they are receiving out into the world to offer forgiveness and peace as Jesus had done. It's a beautiful encounter, one in which Jesus embraces their fears and their doubts, and offers them exactly what they need in order to go forth to serve and love as they are called to do. The stage is set, but the story's not over, because someone was missing. Let's continue....

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 passes by. It's the 2nd Sunday of Easter. Oh, it's today! And here is the rest of the story....

John 20:26-29

A week later Jesus' 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 Jesus 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."

The first time I ever heard of Thomas was in a Christmas song. It was a song warning me not to be a Doubting Thomas in order to believe in – wait for it - Santa Claus. Not sure that's exactly what St. Thomas would want his legacy to be some 2000 years later, but nevertheless, in that silly little Christmas song at my elementary school was the first time I'd heard of Thomas. I quickly discovered that being called a Doubting Thomas was a disparaging comment, somewhat of an insult, or at least a criticism for not having faith, not really believing in Christ, not genuinely trusting God. As I grew up, the last thing I wanted to be was a Doubting Thomas. After all, Jesus says to Thomas "Do not doubt, but believe!" I wanted to

be a believer, one of the good guys, one of the obedient disciples. So, I worked really hard at it through my childhood. I'd pray for a sign, and expect one to occur. When it didn't come, I'd make something up and pretend it was a sign. Or, I'd wallow in guilt, thinking that God wasn't sending a sign because I'd done something wrong, or maybe I was missing the sign because I wasn't a strong enough believer. Well, that was just exhausting. Fortunately, somewhere along the line, I actually started listening to my pastor's sermons. When I listened more carefully, I began to realize that my pastor had doubts. He talked about them all the time in his sermons. He had questions and discussed them openly with us at youth group. And he was about the most faithful, amazing disciple of Jesus Christ I've ever met. How in the world was this possible?!

Well, it's possible for that wonderful pastor, Jack Miller, for the same reason it was possible for this wonderful disciple named Thomas: God's love embraces our doubts. God loves us through our doubts, in our doubt, even because of our doubts. If you look carefully at today's story you can see this.

Just a week earlier, Jesus refused to let Mary touch his hands or feet or give him a hug, saying he needed to ascend to heaven first. He's still very much earthbound in today's scripture, hanging out and appearing to disciples, and yet he offers his hands and his side to Thomas, available to touch and prove to Thomas that Jesus is really real, really right in front of him, really present with him. Mary didn't need to touch Jesus to believe. She could see him right in front of her, but didn't recognize him until he called her by name. It was the voice of love Mary needed to recognize in order to recognize the Risen Christ. And so, Jesus gave her that gift: He called her by name. Later that night, the disciples needed a blessing of peace and comfort to calm their worried minds and troubled souls. So, that's what Jesus gave them, so they could recognize the Risen Christ. Thomas says he needs real hands and real feet, so Jesus says, "Okay, let me give you what you need." "You can touch my hands, whether I've ascended to heaven or not. Go for it. I'll give you what you need."

That's how God works. God's grace is amazing enough to give us what we need, even when it means breaking the rules. God's love is big enough to embrace our doubts, dance with us when we are not sure of the next faith steps to take, and hold us close, or let us wander far away when we are doubting or wondering or questioning. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus shows us this lesson in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the story of a son who wants to run away with his father's fortune and is allowed to do so. But when his life falls apart and he wanders back home, expected to be judged and received as a bad servant, he is welcomed with wide open arms from a Father who rejoices at his return. That parable isn't recorded in

John's Gospel. But Thomas's story is, yet another example of how God is always ready to receive us with arms wide open, no matter how far we wander, how deeply we doubt, or even how strongly we resist God's love. Love is just there, arms out, hands open, saying, "Here I am. You don't need to doubt. You can just believe."

This isn't a command. It is an invitation. An invitation to reach back when God reaches out, an invitation to join the dance of faith even when we have tons of doubts, an invitation to ask our questions and even demand answers, an invitation to come home no matter how far we've wandered or how long we've been away. You don't need to doubt. You can just believe. Maybe Thomas missed that first encounter with Jesus, because comfort wasn't what he needed. He needed room to question, to doubt. He needed to know his doubts were allowed. Jesus' message is loud and clear here. Doubters Welcome. Questions Welcome. You are welcome, no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey.

Lots of churches say that, but this church tries to be a church that really believes it. Doubters Welcome. Questions Welcome. Conversations Welcome. That's love that embraces our doubts and helps us embrace each other, no matter what we've done or what we've said or the mistakes we made or the hurts we've encountered. Love embracing our doubts. Love embracing our shortcomings. Love embracing, no matter what. This is not an easy love. I don't know how God does it, but I know this love changes lives. It changed mine. That's how a little girl trying to do everything right hoping to earn love finally realized I could just lean in and trust God to hold me and love me even when I do everything wrong. That's how a young teenager trying to believe all the right things finally realized I could ask whatever questions I wanted and have all the doubts in the world, and God would still love me, welcoming my questions and embracing my doubts. And you know what? It's been through those times of doubt and through those questioning conversations where my greatest growth in faith has always occurred.

That's the gift of being a Doubting Thomas. Because God embraces our doubts with love, God can transform our doubts with divine energy into faith fuel to help us to grow in new and amazing ways. This is what happened for Thomas. In doubting and questioning, he suddenly recognized the Risen Christ right in front of him. He never even needed to touch those hands. He just cried out with faith and joy, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas' faith continued to grow. It grew so strong that he was able to leave the Roman Empire to spread the good news of Christ's love. Thomas became legendary for his ministry to India, where he is still revered today as their patron saint and the founder of their church, Mar Thoma, Church of Thomas. I have friend from seminary who completed his doctorate in preparation for becoming bishop of that church upon his return home. As Bishop in the Mar Thoma Church, my friend K.U. is deemed a successor to the throne of St. Thomas, the highest honor and authority afforded a priest in that Orthodox tradition, for St. Thomas represents to those Christians devout faith and Christian leadership at its very best. Quite a legacy for a doubter! And what a legacy for his church, that they demand the highest level of education for their bishops (every bishop a Reverend Doctor), so that their bishops continue to role model Thomas' legacy of asking deep questions, nourishing intellectual inquiry and expressing doubts, all the while trusting that God's love is right with us in the conversation, embracing our doubts with arms wide open, ready to receive our questions. So, bring your questions. Bring them on! They are welcome here. They are welcome with God. Bring your doubts. They're welcome too. Most of all, just bring yourself. Doubters, Believers, Questioners, Dreamers: All are welcome here. All are welcome with God.