

The Story of the Faithful Doubter
John 20:19-31
Colebrook Congregational Church
April 23, 2017 / 2nd Sunday of Easter

We are all familiar with the story of Doubting Thomas; how he had doubts, refusing to believe what he was told by the other Disciples about the reappearance of Jesus until he saw him with his own eyes and touched Jesus' wounds. It is a wonderful story that praises and gives hope to the faithful believer, while assuring the doubters that Jesus will not abandon them.

But what happened to Thomas after his doubt was overcome? Well, immediately, he proclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" But what then? What happened to Thomas and all of the other Apostles after Pentecost?

There is not much information to answer that question in the Bible. We have a bunch to piece together something about Peter, Paul, & James, but that's it. Now, because of this and other gaps in the narrative, there was a proliferation of "other" books written to fill in these gaps. In the Fourth Century, church leaders from all Christendom gathered to decide which of these books would become part of the New Testament. Some were declared good reading and edifying to character, but were not on the same level as the Bible; some were deemed too fantastical, especially the stories of Jesus as a moody teenager; and some were just heretical or fakes.

You know the Da Vinci Code? When the movie came out, I was serving at the North Church in Guilford, CT. One night, I was leading an adult Christian Education class on the books that were not included in the Bible. After I gave the introduction, an older man sitting next to me loudly started going on about the movie and asking why things were being kept from us, and why shouldn't we decide for ourselves what should be in the Bible; and he pounded his fist on the table after each point. Meanwhile the Senior Pastor was giggling in the corner just watching this unfold.

When he was done, I reached into my pack and pulled out booklet from a seminary class and said, "Here is the copy we used at school." I then pulled out a book, and said, "Here is my copy of those books." And then I pointed to the bookshelf behind him and said, "And there is this church's copy of those books." Those rejected books are not hidden, they have always been available to read, as well as the writings that give the reasons why they were rejected.

The one he was going on about, and was one of those from that movie, was the Gospel attributed to Thomas, the same Doubting Thomas from today's reading. I explained that the Gospel of Thomas was rejected because it was known to have not been written by Thomas, because there was also a Gnostic text also floating around that was nearly identical, with only the names changed; it was also considered too misogynistic, and if a bunch of ancient Greeks & Romans thought that something was too misogynistic, you know it's bad; and finally, it was based on the belief that Jesus hid teachings from everyone except for a select few Disciples, and the thought that Jesus would hide anything from His believers was not compatible with who Jesus is.

Then there is a book called the Acts of Thomas, about Thomas' life after the Pentecost. There were two aspects to this writing: theology and narrative. The theology in the book is heretical. It is Docetism, a form of Gnosticism. It discourages procreation; it claims that Thomas was the identical twin of Jesus; and it viewed Jesus as not physical. As in He was only present in spirit, like a ghost or spectre, without a physical form, and that effectively renders the Crucifixion meaningless, doing away with our notion of salvation. I found that last part funny, since in John, Thomas would only believe once he could touch Jesus' wounds, but in the Acts of Thomas, the portrayal of Jesus made it impossible to touch those wounds!

Now, once we strip away the heretical theology, we are left with a story of Thomas slowly accepting the duties of his faith in Jesus and traveling to India to spread the Good News there.

Here is what the Acts of Thomas basically claims happened to Thomas after Pentecost. Jesus Commissions the Disciples, just as it says in the Gospels, and in this book, the Disciples draw lots to decide where each should go to answer Jesus' Call to spread the Gospel. Thomas gets India, but he refuses, saying that it was too far. Jesus appeared to Thomas during the night and again in the morning, just about physically forcing Thomas on to a boat.

Thomas landed in Kerala and soon found himself in service to the local king, which led to many conversions, including the royal family. The legend goes that he personally converted about 17,000 and established 7 churches, as well as ordained teachers to spread throughout India.

As he traveled through different regions of India, he angered a different local king because he believed that the loyalty of those Thomas were converting were being divided. When Thomas baptized the king's wife and son, the king sent guards to find Thomas, and they speared him. His final words were recorded as the same as what he said to Jesus when He appeared to assuage his doubt. My Lord and my God.

We can doubt that this happened. There is no independent corroboration of this. For example, a lot of Paul's activities were confirmed independently by Luke, who did not like him very much. We also have have records and letters by Roman governors and Jewish historians that confirm a lot of what is written in the New Testament. There wasn't even any record of the kings mentioned outside of this legend. India is over 3000 miles away. And it was written by a heretic and was filled with heretical theology at odds with our basic understanding of Jesus.

On the other hand, recent archeology has discovered coins bearing the name of one the kings mentioned. Many 2nd & 3rd generation Christian writers mention that Thomas went to India, that churches existed there, that bishops were sent there, and the Indian churches were represented at councils. The coast where Thomas was said to have landed in India was on a trade route that linked the Mediterranean to India to China, and archeologists have found evidence of this. There are Jewish enclaves in those cities to this day that trace their history past that time period. And the worship services are in

Syriac, an ancient form of Aramaic that was spoken by the Apostles.

There seems to be more things that could confirm that Thomas was in India than things that provide doubts to his travel there. It followed the same pattern of how Christianity spread into new areas, starting with Jewish communities on the trade routes. Also consider that we do not actually know what happened to the Apostles for certain, except for James, who was martyred by Herod Agrippa, as recorded in Acts. Tradition and legend from 2nd generation Christians state that Peter went to Rome and was martyred by Nero, and the Catholic Church based their whole papal authority of that tradition. Same goes for Paul, who says he is going to Rome, but we don't know what happened to him there for certain, we assume he was also martyred by Nero. All we have on the rest is just more legends. Do we doubt the legends or take some it on faith?

Jesus commissioned the Apostles to spread the Good News and we can tell from the preserved liturgies and traditions in India and correspondences outside of India that there were Christians in India as early as the first century, so someone must have gone there. It is something that we have to take on faith that something happened there, or else there wouldn't be such indications of ancient Christianity present in India. So why not believe that it was Thomas? At a certain point, it is a question of personal faith and opinion. I heard one scholar state: It is just as likely that Thomas went to India as it is that Peter went to Rome.

From the story of Doubting Thomas in the Gospel of John, we hear about the importance of faith, reason, and doubt. And Thomas can also represents us, Followers 2,000 years after Jesus, when we have doubts in matters of faith, we can be reassured that Jesus will not abandon us, but come back for us, take us by the hand, and lead us back onto the path.

And then in the Acts of Thomas, stripped of the heretical theology, describes how after Thomas doubted, he reluctantly goes on a journey, growing in faith, and he starts acting and making decisions based on faith, to the very end.

The Apostle Thomas can be an example of what we should do and be once our doubts are extinguished by Jesus. We should be bold in our faith, and reach out, spreading the Good News, in word and deed, following the path of Jesus, wherever He leads us.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

God of our lives, move through the locked doors of our hearts. Open us to Your love moving in the world. Instruct us as Jesus taught the disciples. Make a new church of us, a blessed place where we live in unity. And help us to learn from those first believers who Followed Jesus. Renew in us the power of Your Spirit, That we may open the doors, And go out into the world, To bring words of peace to the people we meet, And go wherever you send us. In Jesus' name. Amen

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give you thanks for Jesus has risen and comes with words of peace! Thank you for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

You know our faults and yet You promise to forgive. Help us to face up to ourselves, so that, as You move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to You, and receive mercy.

We offer our prayers for our neighbors and loved ones. We pray for those whose lives are broken by distress, by fear, by anger, by pain, or by illness. We pray for the victims of war and senseless violence, that the cruelty end soon. We ask that You gently touch their lives by Your Spirit, bringing Your warmth and comfort, to bring hope & restoration to fractured lives and souls.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We ask that You come to us when we are afraid and that you give us the strength & perseverance to live through any disappointments and the courage to overcome obstacles. Fill us with Your Spirit and make us living carriers of of Your Love to all who need it. Grant us the patience, calmness and serenity needed in this chaotic world.

We especially pray for:
The Suddath Family

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 16

16:1 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

16:2 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."

16:3 As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.

16:4 Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.

16:5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

16:6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

16:7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

16:8 I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

16:9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.

16:10 For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.

16:11 You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

John 20:19-31

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." 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 later his 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 he 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." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.