

## HONEST QUESTIONS

John 20: 19-31

April 3, 2005 SBCC

When I was in the third grade, Mrs. Burlock, my teacher asked us to write a “composition” as they called them in those days, about how the world began. I guess we had been studying evolution although I don’t really remember that part of it. In all of my eight year old self-righteousness, I wrote that God had created the world in seven days. I think I even wrote out the order of the creation process. I knew it wasn’t the answer the teacher wanted but I was sure I was right and I was willing to sacrifice a good grade in order to stand firm in my faith. I knew that I knew better than my teacher. That’s about the last time I was really certain about anything having to do with God.

That’s not quite true I guess. I’m certain that God is, but if you ask me to define God, I collapse into a quivering mass of uncertainty. I am able to confess, with full faith and confidence that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, but if you ask me what we mean when we say “Jesus died to save us from our sins, I will tell you right out that I don’t know. There are at least six different theories of atonement currently floating around in theological circles. I suppose I could pick the one that seems most reasonable to me, but I surely wouldn’t be willing to bet much on it.

All this is to say, that Thomas is my kind of disciple. He’s the one called “Doubting Thomas.” I think a lot of us can relate to Thomas. Like Thomas, we love to ask questions: frivolous ones like, “When one of the disciples sneezed did Jesus say “I bless you?” or “How many angels can sit on the head of a pin?” or, serious questions, like the one many of us think about these days “Are there other paths to God, except through Jesus?” or “Is there really a hell?” “Given recent archeological discoveries, how can we know what’s true?” “How can we know anything is true?”

If you don’t like questions, then Thomas isn’t your disciple. But if you are one of those people honest enough to admit that you don’t know everything, then Thomas is your patron saint.

Whenever anything came up that Thomas didn’t believe or understand, his questions were direct. There was the last time Jesus and the disciples were together in that upper room. Jesus was talking about dying, and he said he would be leaving them soon, but it wouldn’t be forever. He told them he was going to prepare a place for them. He said they would know the way to this place and someday they would be there with him. Nobody else breathed a word, but Thomas couldn’t hold back. He had no idea where Jesus was going and he didn’t know the way to get there either. Thomas blurted out, “You’re wrong lord. We don’t have the foggiest. How are we supposed to know all of this?” There is more faith in insisting on an explanation than in glibly repeating the things that haven’t reached our head or our heart. Thomas had the courage and the common sense to ask what all of them should have been asking.

Thomas was the voice of reason in a group of people who were notorious for not “getting it.” When Jesus insisted on going back to Judea to be with the family of his friend Lazarus, who had just died, the disciples, and I’d bet it was Thomas, tried to talk him out of it.

The last time Jesus had been there, the Jewish leaders had tried to stone him. When it became clear that Jesus was determined to go, Thomas agreed to go, too, but he was smart enough to know what was coming. The temptation for the unthinking follower is to merrily believe that nothing bad will happen. Thomas essentially said, “Let’s all go, so that we can die with him.” His eyes were wide open.

Thomas was one of the twelve. I would assume that after three years of traveling with them and Jesus, he loved them all, but someone had to keep their feet on the ground, especially after everything fell apart and Jesus was crucified. Thomas missed the Easter service. The disciples had gathered for a secret meeting. Even a closed-door meeting was risky for the followers of one who had just been executed for treason. Only after it became clear that the religious authorities were satisfied with snuffing out the ringleader did Thomas cautiously emerge to look for the others.

When he returned, Thomas found that the disciples were deep into what he quickly recognized as the denial phase of the grief process. They claimed that Jesus was alive and that he had appeared to them. Thomas’ reaction was just what they should have expected. It would have been simple for him to act like he believed, but Thomas wouldn’t pretend. It had to be real to him. It might have been a hoax. Some imposter might be claiming to be Jesus. It might be some form of mass hysteria. Thomas simply couldn’t believe that what they had seen was anything more than wishful thinking. “Unless I put my finger into the mark of the nails in his hands, and unless I put my hand in his side, there’s no way I’ll ever believe.”

A week later Jesus shows up again and says, “Okay Thomas, touch my hands and put your hand in my side.” Jesus was calling Thomas’ bluff.

And isn’t it interesting that, according to this gospel account, God raised Jesus from the dead, but didn’t heal the nail wounds in his hands? Was it an oversight? Maybe part of the point is that the power of death is conquered but the wounds remain. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, when Thomas wasn’t there, the gospel says “He showed them his hands and his side.” Why did Jesus do that? Nobody asked for it. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Here is my signature.” Thomas’ instinct was right in asking to see the marks of the nails and the spear. He didn’t say, “Unless I see his halo I won’t believe it.” The wounds remain.

That was enough. For all his misgivings about the resurrection, when Jesus confronted Thomas with the evidence he demanded, the nail prints and the wound, Thomas believed enough to change his mind. He makes one of the greatest confessions of all time. This is the biggest thing that anyone said in any gospel: “My Lord and My God.”

Thomas’ doubting faith leads him to greater faith. He offers the highest word of confession. Thomas comes to belief precisely because he refused to say he understood what he didn’t

understand. He refused to say that he believed what he didn't believe. He was uncompromisingly honest about his doubts and questions. Those who doubt fiercely believe fiercely.

Since that event Thomas has carried the nickname "Doubting Thomas." It's not only unfair to Thomas, but it's also unfair to the word "doubt," because it's not considered a compliment, and it should be. Doubt doesn't deserve its poor reputation. Far too many people see doubt as the opposite of belief. You either doubt or you believe. Bumper stickers proclaim, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." There are no bumper stickers that say "The Bible has a lot of hard teachings that I am struggling to understand."

An unquestioning faith may not be faith at all. People who think believing is easy usually haven't believed very much. Memorizing someone else's answers isn't believing. Have you ever noticed that many of the folks who claim to know God's opinions on everything, who look down on those who have questions, often drop out the first time it becomes clear to them that some of the opinions of which they were certain just aren't so? It may seem easier to coast through life without doubts or questions, but people with an unexamined faith never grow. It may seem simpler to copy off your neighbor's paper, but you can't borrow someone else's faith.

There is more belief in honest doubt than in all the easy answers in the world. People of faith learn to factor in a lot of uncertainty. The great poet, John Donne wrote, "To come to a doubt is (to hear) the voice of God in our conscience: would you know the truth? Doubt and then you will inquire." Our responsibility is to question until the answers are our own. Faith is done with a pencil and eraser in a loose-leaf binder.

It's by questioning that we find our way to deeper faith. The people who struggle to believe end up with a faith worth the struggle. There will always be problems that will make us doubt what we thought we had already decided. We won't understand everything that we want to understand, but we can know enough of God's goodness, forgiveness and love to hold fast to the hope of grace. We can know that God is the one to whom we owe life itself. We can know God's comfort in the midst of doubt.

There is a poem by the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, that has been important in my life for many years. Let me share it with you.

*Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart.*

*And try to live the questions themselves.*

*Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you  
because you would not be able to live them.*

*And the point is to live everything.*

*Live the questions now.*

*Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it  
,you will live along some distant day into the answer.*