

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Skeptics are Welcome”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Easter 2—April 23, 2017

Lesson: John 20:19-31

I am going to invite you into a conversation I had this past week. I won't share any names but you'll likely be able to figure out the characters.

“Dad, do you think Jesus really rose from the dead?”

“Yes.”

“What about the Holy Grail?”

“What about it?”

“Is it real?”

“I don't think so.”

“Do you have doubts?”

“Yes.”

“You're a minister. You can't have doubts!”

“I do.”

I am happy to admit that I absolutely do have doubts and in fact I'm proud to bear the name Thomas, the name of the disciple who often is remembered in a bad light as the one who doubted when he shouldn't have. In fact I think we should commend Thomas' courage. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus spoke to the disciples on the night before his death, words many of us hold dear: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”<sup>1</sup> The very next words are spoken by Thomas who asks what everyone else must have been thinking: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas was the honest skeptic who was brave enough to speak up when he did not understand.

In the evening, that first day of the week, the disciples gathered behind locked doors, cowering in fear and suddenly Jesus stood among them. Thomas wasn't there. We don't know where he was. Maybe he decided to play golf that day, or head off to Brew Ha Ha for some good coffee. Or maybe he was helping someone in need. Maybe he was serving the poor. Maybe he was so broken after the death of Jesus that he just needed time on his own. We don't know why he wasn't with the other disciples, but the fact that he wasn't there means that he missed out on seeing the risen Lord on that first Easter day.

So the disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord and Thomas responds: “Look, unless I see his wounds, the nail holes in his hands to stick my fingers in, and put my hand in his side, I won't believe it.” Doubting Thomas. But look more carefully. He is really no different than the other disciples. Mary had told them that she had seen Jesus and they respond by locking the doors and hiding away. When Jesus appears to them, he says “Peace be with you” and he shows them his hands and side and then the disciples were glad. Only after they see for themselves do they rejoice. They are very like Thomas. Like the other disciples, Thomas needs to see for himself. So Jesus comes back and appears for him. And

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:1-4

Thomas doesn't need to put his finger in the holes in Jesus' hands. He makes the most powerful and complete confession in all of John's gospel: "My Lord and my God!" In the end, you might even suggest that he is even stronger than the other disciples.

Thomas is the patron saint for those of us who might be called skeptics, who have doubts, for those of us who don't always believe, for those of us searching for more on which to base our belief. Bill Muehl, one of my professors at Yale, has written that in all probability, most of the people in church in their heart of hearts, feel that they are there on false pretenses, that everyone around them feels more confidently Christian...than they do themselves.<sup>2</sup> Ever feel that way, that everyone around you is somehow more confidently Christian than you are? Maybe the reason Thomas is called the Twin is because he really is one of us.

Part of the reason that we have the story of Thomas in Scripture is to remind us that asking questions is a good thing. Thomas might have liked that bumper sticker that says *Question Authority*. He'd probably agree with Frederick Buechner that "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."<sup>3</sup> If you've ever known a time when your grief was so strong, say after the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or the shattering of a dream and you just couldn't believe, Thomas would understand. If you consider yourself to be a beginning Christian, a searching Christian and you haven't had a lightening call from God like that of Paul on the road to Damascus, if you're instead a Christian who isn't always sure what you believe, but gradually you are moving closer to Christ--maybe three steps forward and two back--Thomas would understand. At the far end of Thomas' struggle, Jesus sought him out and transformed his doubts into the strongest confession found in this gospel: "My Lord and my God!" Keep an eye on those people who are not too quick to believe, those people who are not always sure what they believe, the honest skeptics and the courageous pessimists, they may sometimes end up being the strongest of disciples.

Another reason I like Thomas is that despite his questions, his doubts, his feelings of loss, and his demands, he remains a part of the community. He did not go off on his own, feeling sorry for himself because he didn't get to see Jesus and everybody else did. He continued within the community and remained open to the possibility that he too might yet be able to see and believe for himself. And, of course, it was there in community that Jesus appeared and Thomas believed.

If you know a time when you have trouble believing, when God seems so far away and the faith that maybe once seemed vital and alive is now weak and unsupportive, that is not a time to stay away from church. Like Thomas, that is a time to rely on the faith of the community, and keep our eyes and our hearts open for the risen Christ in our midst. I love the definition of the church as that place where when we cannot sing, or pray, or believe for ourselves, the community will sing and pray and believe for us. Stay with the community; that is where the risen Christ is most likely to appear.

Shawnthea Monroe points out that "In John's Gospel, the only people who see the risen Christ are those who knew him in life. They recognize him not by how he looks, but by his words and his wounds. It makes you wonder if perhaps other people saw the resurrected Jesus but had no context for the encounter. We don't recognize people we don't know.

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<sup>2</sup> William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* © 1986 Fortress Press.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC* © 1973 Harper's

“I think this is why I make my children go to church. I want them to get to know Jesus Christ well enough so they recognize the risen one when they encounter him in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Whatever your level of skepticism or doubt or pain, keep coming to church, so that you too might recognize the risen Christ when he appears.

Finally I want to lift up the words that Jesus speaks to Thomas and to the other disciples. He says: “Peace be with you.” Those words echo earlier words of Jesus that many of you will recognize: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”<sup>5</sup> The peace Jesus proclaims to Thomas and the other disciples is a peace that is proclaimed on the far side of the cross. It is a word spoken by the risen Christ to all of us today. According to Cameron Murchison, “The peace that is not offered by the world is the peace that comes from the knowledge that, in spite of all the hurt and harm the world can and does inflict, God’s compassion and care embodied in Jesus stands again in their midst, the crucifixion notwithstanding.”<sup>6</sup>

Skeptics are welcome here. Whoever you are and wherever you are on the journey of faith, you are welcome here. You can come and see for yourself. Christ is risen and Christ’s words for you today are: Peace be with you.

Let us pray: Come to us dear God where we are, with our questions, amidst our confusion, and transform them into a living faith. In our fearful and hurting world, speak your word of peace and send us forth to share that peace far and wide. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Shawnthea Monroe, *To Know Him is to See Him*, March 31, 2016 © The Christian Century.

<sup>5</sup> John 14: 27

<sup>6</sup> D. Cameron Murchison, in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2:Lent Through Easter*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors. © 2010 Westminster John Knox Press.