

Old Testament Lesson—Deuteronomy 34:7-12

Moses was 120 years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired & his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab 30 days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; & the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs & wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh & all his servants & his entire land, & for all the mighty deeds & all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

New Testament Lesson—John 20:19-31 & 21:24-25

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." 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.

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Christ is risen! (He is risen, indeed). Christ is risen! (He is risen, indeed).

Indeed, huh? Sure about that? You sound pretty sure of yourselves, there—like you know this for real—like, "Of course he's risen!"—like, Duh, Jesus ain't dead!

He is risen, indeed. Are y'all saying this because you've been conditioned to say it—trained to say it—because you're supposed to respond that way when someone says, "Christ is risen?"

Or do you also really *believe* it? Do you honestly believe in the Resurrection? Indeed, do you know this to be true? Can we claim that Jesus is alive...beyond...a reasonable...doubt?

As the *Apostle's Creed* says, "I believe...on the third day he rose again from the dead. I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Do. We. Really?

In your heart of hearts—that inmost part of you—do you believe Christ is risen? Do we believe this beyond a reasonable doubt?

We, of course, hear that phrase a lot in our criminal justice system, right? It's our highest standard of proof. We, the jury, believe this to be true "beyond a reasonable doubt."

Now, Lord knows that matters of faith and religion and the ways we come to believe in and about God are quite different from the ways a jury might reach a conclusion about a case—different from how they might reach a verdict in a trial.

After all, a jury has to examine and take stock of all the available evidence. A jury has to be seriously engaged—has to meticulously pore over detailed documents—has to determine the reliability of eyewitnesses and the testimonies they offer.

You could even describe prosecutors and defense attorneys as elaborate storytellers. Both are presenting a version of events that they hope will convince a group of people that what they've heard is true.

In that sense then, a jury's most basic job is to decide if a story is believable. And they do this together, as a group—thinking and debating and processing with each other.

You know...the more I think about it...maybe matters of faith *aren't* really that different from how juries make decisions. Because, oftentimes, we can be given all the evidence in the world, but unless we managed to witness the events in question with our own eyes, in full control of our faculties—or unless the act in question happened to be caught on video, there's always going to be a measure of "faith" involved.

The fact of the matter is there's always going to be a step we're asked to make of our own accord—a leap of faith if you will—a space between "beyond reasonable doubt" and absolute, indisputable certainty.

If a prosecutor is successful in court, they'll have presented a story—a sequence of events—that's given a jury the confidence to enter into that mysterious and sacred space somewhere "beyond a reasonable a doubt" but short of absolute truth.

As Christ's Body, the Church, I believe we're being called into that same mysterious space—a space *between* reasonable doubt and total certainty—somewhere between the (currently) absent Thomas and the Thomas whose fingers have just grazed the same wounds on the same body he knew perished and was buried only three days before.

For Jesus' perhaps most inquisitive disciple, Christ's death and crucifixion *was* indisputable—*impossible* to doubt. Otherwise, Thomas and the rest of them wouldn't be held up in a locked room, hiding from the mob, fearing for their lives, and praying things would calm down—praying the search for conspirators would end.

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 [Thomas] 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."

The author of John doesn't tell us where Thomas was or why he wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first came. But I think we can safely assume it had to be for a darn good reason because, as we know, these were dangerous days. Why leave the safety of the locked room unless you had no choice?

He could've been off gathering food and supplies. Somebody had to. Remember, Jesus doesn't reappear to Thomas and the others until another week has passed! They had to eat. Perhaps he was out trying to find other disciples or assess how bad things still were in the city. We just don't know.

What we do know, according to John, is this: *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!"*

Notice how Jesus responds to Thomas here. After all, Jesus is aware of the trauma they've experienced and the grief they're feeling. There's no hint of Christ being somehow put-off by Thomas' questioning. There's no chastising or wagging the finger at Thomas—no “how dare you!”s or “Get behind me Satan”s. There's no condemning Thomas for being, understandably, slower to come around.

There's only Jesus freely and without hesitation submitting to Thomas' request. “Come and see. Feel for yourself. It's really me, brother. I'm right here.”

And yet, the Church has heaped this unwarranted weight of judgment upon Thomas for centuries: the story of “doubting Thomas” we say. Have you noticed we even tend to lump Thomas in with Judas and Peter? Judas the betrayer, Peter the denier, and Thomas the doubter...like some unholy “trinity” of what not to do...

How unbelievably unfair, don't you think? I, for one, seriously *don't* believe this was Jesus' intention—for his followers two millennia later to have such a dim view of Thomas—someone who had the audacity to ask questions—to bring his honest doubts out in the open.

Ironically, it takes a certain kind of bravery—a bold kind of faith to feel safe enough to raise the important questions and expose the doubts we have.

And it's at this point in John's gospel when the storytelling takes a pause. The narrator steps away from telling the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and begins to reflect upon what he's written. Here is where the gospel actually talks about itself!

Friends, I have to tell you...these are my absolute favorite parts of the Bible by far—when an author basically breaks the “fourth wall.” When this happens, the “who” and “what” of the story stops and the “why” begins.

The gospels do this. Paul does this. We see it all throughout Scripture and when it happens, we get a rare look not only into history itself but inside the writer's mind. In other words, we get a backstage pass to the Bible. We get a deep look inside the author's motive—the intent behind the story—*why* it exists and *why* it was written down in the first place.

And the attorneys in the room can tell you that it's a person's motive that is so often the most difficult thing to prove beyond a reasonable doubt.

But thankfully, John allows us to peer behind the curtain just before wrapping things up. He gives us the motive free of charge: *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.*

Yes, there is a purpose to these words and teachings and miracles recorded here. Of course there's an agenda to John's story. And that purpose is evangelical. His goal is to convincingly communicate the good news that Christ is no longer held captive by a grave but that he is risen!

Siblings in Christ, the good news of the gospel is, indeed, that Jesus is entombed no longer but alive and encountering us wherever we happen to be. But wait, there's more!

The good news, my friends—the greatest news, is that Christ is risen *and* that he welcomes our doubts! Christ has been raised *and* encourages our questions. The Lord of Lords is alive *and* meets us where we are, no matter how sure we are.

It's why John gives us the story of Thomas the Twin, Thomas the Inquisitive, Thomas whose hesitation isn't criticized by Jesus but embraced—embraced in such a way that Thomas' faith is able to grow from the seeds of doubt.

So it is with Christ's disciples today, too. Our questions and doubts can actually bring us closer to the truth, my friends. Just look to the example of the one who faithfully doubted: None of Jesus' other disciples confess him to be their God but Thomas does, proclaiming, "*My Lord and my God!*"

So it is with the entirety of Scripture. The purpose of the Bible is to point us in the direction of Jesus Christ—to bring us to a place that we feel safe enough to ask the hard questions in community—safe enough to admit when we're not fully there—that we're not as far along as we wish we were—that we have our issues and spiritual struggles and that's okay. It's okay. It's okay if you're not ever completely convinced.

Just keep going. Keep wandering in the general direction of the Promised Land. Keep trying. Keep asking, because Jesus ain't afraid of your questions. On the contrary, our Lord comes near to us when we're confused. Our Lord is near even when we refuse to entertain the faintest whisper of hope because our grief is so overwhelming.

Siblings in Christ: Our doubts are an essential part of this life of faith. In my view, it's those most difficult questions—the ones we seem to be constantly wrestling with that give us the greatest opportunities for our faith to grow.

And it's those precious moments of sheer honesty, when we're exposed for who we really are—those moments of desperate truth-searching that bring us closer to God. It's those moments that help us follow Christ more closely.

And, yes, it's those moments that perhaps even give us the boost we need to believe—to believe beyond a reasonable doubt that Resurrection really is possible.

For Christ Jesus, even now—seated at the right hand of the Father—still has those wounds. And one day, perhaps, we'll have the privilege of placing our hands there too.

There is wisdom in doubt...Never doubt the impact of asking the hard questions. In short, never doubt the value of your doubts.

Amen.