

Community Church of Issaquah
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Being a Doubting Thomas

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Even though Easter was a few weeks ago and I have had several sermons about what happened during the last days of the life of Christ, there is one more narrative that has a very personal and deep meaning for me. It's the story of Thomas that we heard a bit about in the Scriptures today. This doubting disciple and I have some things in common and each time I read these passages or hear something about "Doubting Thomas," it causes me to reflect on my own spiritual journey. It's hard for me not to feel some sense of closeness with this man. Not that I have doubted the resurrection and felt the necessity of having to physically touch the body of Christ, but that my mind finds itself racing through a multitude of questions.

All my life, God has been very real to me, even from my childhood days. The messages I heard preached, the stories we heard in Sunday School, the music we sang and their words – all of this gave me a real sense of God's presence in my life. I've tried to follow these teachings from the scriptures, the Ten Commandments, the "thou shalt not's" and the "thou shalt's." It has been vitally important to me that I adhere to the teachings of Christ about loving and caring for others. Having grown up in the church and feeling a calling into ministry, I believed that all of this has to do with who God is and who we are.

If we are honest, we'd have to admit that it is very hard to live that kind of life. We live in a world where people can be and often are cruel, hate-filled, and have no compassion. Yet, God is very real for me and I have tried to be a spiritual person who lives by the example set by Jesus and inspired by a loving God. But also all my life I have been one who thinks about things, probably too much, and questions things I can't explain or find an explanation in the Bible. Maybe I should politely say "I'm just curious" about these things rather than to say I'm a doubting kind of man.

That curiosity has led me to try to learn more and expand my own knowledge about things that are important to me as a believer. I sought answers to the things that buzzed in my head. If Adam and Eve had two sons, where did all the generations that followed come from? If Jonah was swallowed by a whale and stayed there until he was spit out on shore, where did a whale come from in a river in the desert, not a sea? Why did the children of Israel spend 40 years in the desert before they claimed the Promised Land when the distance between Egypt and Israel is only a few hundred miles? What were they doing? So many questions of curiosity that would run through my thinking. And over and over as I raised these questions, I was taught not to be a "doubting Thomas," but to just accept things as they were spoken. Sunday School teachers, pastors, college and seminary professors – they viewed my questions as disbelief and tried to re-convert me to just be a "normal" believer. And I tried.

But over and over, I came back to this story about Thomas. Here was a disciple that wasn't present when Jesus appeared the first time after this resurrection. We don't know where he was or why he wasn't there, but for whatever reason, Thomas was absent. The other disciples were ecstatic about Jesus's return from the dead, but Thomas wasn't convinced and adamantly said he would not believe it until he not only saw Jesus but could feel the wounds. I can hear a determined man saying, "Not until I see it myself." When I read that the first time, I thought to myself, "That's not unreasonable. You should just take someone's word for it if you haven't seen it yourself." If I can offer a bit of advice here, that is not something you want to say to a fundamentalist minister.

For me, however, there was an even bigger question of doubt and took me years to understand and accept. I struggled to understand how God could send his only son as a sacrifice to God – himself. The Scriptures have told us that the sacrifice had to be morally pure who would save humankind from God's wrath for sinful humanity. The crucifixion was brutal, inhumane and should never have been the death of anyone, especially Jesus. Even if there was a resurrection at the end of the violence that God would grant forgiveness, how could this have happened that way?

I struggled with that burning question for a very long time until I heard the words of another minister sharing about his understanding of the "doubting Thomas." He explained it like this. Thomas had heard the other disciples tell him about the risen Christ, and that's when he said, "I'll believe

it when I see it and feel it. I must see it for myself.” So, the risen Christ obliged. He appeared to Thomas and told him to place his hand on the wounds on his side. My friend called these “wounds of the world.” These were the wounds of all the world that had been born by the body of God. They are wounds reflecting how wicked human beings can be to one another and how we disobey the path and teachings God has created for us so we could be good and do good.

Through the death and suffering of Christ, God shows us that he knows all of these wounds of the world and that his son will bear all these wounds. In the resurrection, God embraces us and will carry us all into a renewed life. I just didn't understand how violence had to be necessary for there to be forgiveness. I've never been a person of violence, but like everyone, I've been a sinner. And like everyone else, I have needed forgiveness. Then it dawned on me that for God to forgive any original sin, he required a sacrifice that humanity couldn't make. The blood of an animal like a lamb would not accomplish what God wanted for us as humans, so he sent Jesus to take on himself the punishment of God's judgement.

In Christ, there was this union of the human and the divine. When those humans of power lashed out at Jesus, denying not only that he was divine in his life but that he was a human and could not be raised from the dead. Jesus was the target and treated like a criminal, a blasphemer, a heretic. And so he was executed. Crucified to appease the evil wishes of those who would not and

could not accept who he was and what his purpose in life was.

Through Christ's death, God took upon himself the pain and the tragedy of the wounds of the world's evil and sin. And then, the resurrection of Christ shows us that evil and sin are totally powerless because of the power and love of God. That's the message: God loves and forgives anyone and everyone. Then it all began to make sense to me. As the Father of Jesus, God was watching what happened to him was truly heartbreaking, but it was necessary to fulfill the promise of a way for us to be forgiven and to have an eternal life with Christ when we believe, seek forgiveness, and trust. God bore that pain until the joy of Christ's resurrection happened.

Even though at times I have been a doubting Thomas, it was never based on whether or not there actually was a man named Jesus, who lived a righteous life, was sacrificed on my behalf, and was raised from the dead. That wasn't what I doubted. My doubt and curiosity came from the haunting questions about God. "If God is love, where was the love in giving up your child to be murdered?" How could I explain that? But now I have come to see that it was indeed God's love, not just for Jesus, but for you and me, that saved me. The truth is that God loves and forgives humanity whether we ask for it or not. When we accept that truth, we are set free and saved from the meaninglessness of sin itself. We realize that we are restored to being children of a living God. And that is the good news of the Bible.

I have always felt a kinship to Thomas and his desire to have reality proven to him. I don't need everything proven to me to quench my thirst for understanding, but I do, from time to time, need God to help me to conquer my doubts. Oh, I know I will never understand how 40 days of rain could cover the entire earth with water so that Noah and 2 of all the animal species could float to a mountaintop in Turkey. Or how Jonah could have lived inside a whale that must have wandered from the ocean to a river. Or how the children of Israel would wander in a few hundred miles of desert for 40 years. Those doubts may not ever be crushed in my little brain. But why God allowed Jesus to die and what that means to me today – there is no doubt in my Thomas-like mind that it all had to do with God's love for all of us.