

2 Easter (Year B)

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The Opposite of Faith is Not Doubt but Certainty

John 20:24-29

Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with [the disciples] 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."



"Doubting" Thomas is one of my all-time favorite Bible characters. He always shows up on the Second Sunday of Easter and, well, let's just say he's a character that always makes me think.

As I was thinking about this morning's Gospel passage, one quote kept coming back to me. "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." I'll say that again: "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." It's been attributed to a bunch of people, but I think the theologian Paul Tillich is the most likely author.

"The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." It implies that doubt is not only a *natural* part of faith but an *essential* part. To doubt, to question, to test, is integral to a mature faith. It means that it has been examined and considered rather than blindly accepted.

Though at one level, it's odd that Thomas and the whole notion of doubt shows up so soon after Easter Day. After the euphoria of last week's celebration, it would be understandable if we tried to just smooth over any cracks in the facade of our faith. Plug them up with Cadbury Eggs or hide them behind a giant Easter lily.

But this story of Thomas is a tangible reminder that doubt is an important piece of a healthy, vibrant faith. And I think that's freeing because so often we seek to *suppress* our doubts rather than *embrace* them; to *deny* our doubts rather than *acknowledge* them.

At least publicly.

We may well question things or wrestle with our beliefs in the middle of the night but surely not on Sunday morning. Not during coffee hour. Not while basking in the warm glow of the Resurrection, with the altar still dressed up with Easter flowers. Surely not today.

But then Thomas shows up.

The thing is, faith isn't a "smiley face mask" that we put on when we come to church. Like the human face, faith is full of changing emotions and nuance. It can express joy and fear and grief. It can exhibit love and anxiety and peace. Faith encompasses the full range of human emotion.

Which is precisely why I love Thomas and the prominent role he plays on the Second Sunday of Easter. Because there's something comforting about the fact that even an apostle of Jesus, one of the twelve, had serious doubts about his faith.

Words were nice, the testimony of his friends were fine but Thomas wanted *proof*. You could argue that he should be the patron saint of skepticism, a man of reason before the Age of Reason. He didn't just fall into line with the others and put on his smiley face mask. He's not known to history as "Get with the Program" Thomas. He was true to himself, authentic in his skepticism, not afraid to raise his objections.

Thomas speaks for all of us who, even as we belt out Easter hymns and affirm our faith in the ancient creeds, can't help but say "wait a minute, I have a few questions." And for that we can give thanks. "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."

Because if the opposite of faith is indeed certainty, Thomas proves his faithfulness by *not* being certain. He has the spiritual need to test and question the assumptions of others. And over the years, I've found that God is often most present in the struggle; in the wrestling with our faith. Believe me, God can take it. God isn't a precious china doll sitting inside a locked case to be observed and admired rather than played with and engaged.

The problem with certainty is that it can quickly devolve into rigidity and self-righteousness. If *I* am certain that I have all the answers, then *you* are surely wrong. And a *living* faith quickly becomes a *fossilized* faith with no room for a new revelation or the influence of the Holy Spirit to blow in and make all things new.

This doesn't mean that doubt is always easy. There are times when we really do struggle with faith. There's that passage in Mark that I think captures the dual nature of faith. A man brings Jesus a boy who has been possessed by a demon. Jesus heals the child, and the father immediately exclaims, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Faith and doubt all wrapped up in a tangle of emotions. And yet the desire to believe

is stronger than the doubts. Even in, or maybe *especially* in, those moments when we cry out to God, “help my unbelief!”

As we think about the miraculous events surrounding that first Easter Day it becomes clear that sometimes our faith is lived in an “If only” mindset. If only...I had been there at the empty tomb, I would be much more faithful. If only...I had been able to look into Jesus’s eyes or see him heal that blind man, I would be much more faithful. If only...I had been there for the Sermon on the Mount and heard Jesus preach, I would be much more faithful.

But that’s not our place in the whole expanse of God’s creation. We stand at this moment of time in the ever-unfolding plan of salvation. And Jesus offers us a final Beatitude. You know the Beatitudes, from the aforementioned Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are the pure in heart; Blessed are the peacemakers; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

That’s us! You are blessed in a special way for your belief, for your presence here this morning, for your seeking after God even when doubts persist. And God rejoices in that relationship with you, wherever you happen to be along the continuum of your faith at any given time.

“The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” As with life itself, faith is not all black and white. There is nuance and there are shades of gray. And God is right in the midst of it all.