

Thomas

April 10, 2016

Last week we heard the story of Peter and how he was restored to relationship with Jesus as they stood around the charcoal fire and ate the breakfast that Jesus had prepared for them. That grace filled time when Jesus modeled his love and grace to one who had so clearly and vehemently denied knowing him only days earlier. In this group of disciples is Thomas, the one who had already been bathed in this grace when he was needy.

But I get ahead of my story. Jesus had appeared to the disciples who were meeting behind locked doors on an occasion when Thomas was not with them. As good friends do, when they saw Thomas the next time they tell him that have seen Jesus. As I recount this story to you this morning, I am rather matter of fact, but can you imagine if you were living in that time..... how you may have felt if you were Thomas? My guess is you would have been overwhelmed with your friend's voices of how Jesus appeared to them, how he looked and how they felt about this encounter, and that he had appeared even though the doors were locked. This was not an everyday occurrence. Thomas needed proof of what his friends were telling him. He was not going to take someone's wild dream to be his reality. Thomas had after all seen Jesus dead, lifeless and put into the tomb. I assume that Thomas along with the other disciples had followed at a distance and observed all the past events. For all we know Thomas was angry, disillusioned, scared and wondering "what now, and what just happened here?" I can imagine he was in the midst of deep grief where what he had believed was going to happen came crashing down as he witnessed his leader, the one that was to deliver them from Roman rule, the one who was going to set up a new kingdom was killed right in front of him and he couldn't stop it.

Thomas had after all given up his vocation as a fisherman to follow this one who had given him hope for the future. Now he was dead. Thomas didn't need anyone else compounding his pain by telling him that Jesus was alive. The hope had died with Jesus and now these friends wanted him to believe something that

just couldn't be true? And Thomas speaks, "No thank you.....unless I see those hands with the nail prints and put my hand on that opening in his side, you can forget about me believing this foolishness. Find someone else who will believe your irrational sightings, I have not time or energy for this." What Thomas had expected from Jesus and his teaching did not match what had happened. His expectations were hopelessly dashed.

We all know about expectations not being met at some point in your life. As I was preparing, I thought of a time when this happened to me and let me just say this let down doesn't compare with what Thomas felt but we all experience let downs. The year I turned 36 I was a stay at home mom with a one year old, a three year old and two others that were 6 & 8. I was a busy mom. On the day of my birthday a good friend stopped in and as I went to the door to greet her she handed me a beautifully wrapped package with a bow on top. I was feeling overwhelmed and rather discouraged that day and was so delighted that someone had remembered my birthday. I invited her in while I opened the package, but she declined and said she was very busy and needed to go. I savored this package as I went back into the house and proceeded to open this gift. To my utter dismay I opened the gift and it was filled with sticks and stones with a note on top that said, "April fools." Yes my birthday is April 1 and I have had a number of tricks played on me because of it, but this one felt over the top, and as I look back on it I think it was because I felt needy and someone had remembered and then my expectations were dashed rather rudely and I burst into tears. This is also the same person that brought me a decorated birthday cake at a church fellowship meal and handed me the knife to cut it front of everyone and finding the cake was cardboard covered with beautiful frosting. You have to admit she was creative.

Expectations are a powerful feeling and when they are dashed it can send us into sense of despair. I think this is where Thomas found himself as his friends gathered around him. He couldn't hope again, so soon after the big letdown.

Just as we saw Jesus meeting Peter right where his need was, he meets Thomas at his point of need. Thomas needed proof, he needed data, Thomas needed to be sure, he needed to see for himself and Jesus met him there.

Jesus presents himself to Thomas and invites him to touch, to feel, to see the data, to connect with the undeniable truth – it really was Jesus. But at this point Thomas doesn't need to touch, he has been jolted to faith and he simply cries out, "My Lord and my God!" A declaration of faith that overshadows all that has come before. A renewed hope was born out of this proclamation. History tells us that Thomas goes on to be an apostle sharing faith as far as Syria and India where there are still pockets of Christianity that hold Thomas as their founder.

As we look in on this story, we don't see Jesus criticizing Thomas for his doubt. It is the readers who have dubbed him as "doubting Thomas." We have been critics, but again I wonder if we would have been any different had we been in his sandals. We have the advantage of knowing the story, looking back at it, but remember, he was living the story.

So what can we learn from this story? Maybe we need to ask, how do we carry our doubts? Have you made friends with your doubt? I am quite confident that most of us have changed our views about many issues since we began our journey of faith, and I assume that healthy faith is always in the state of evolving as we experience life and our relationship with God matures. Sitting with the "Owls" Wed. noon and hearing them share about changes they have made was inspiring.

But doubting faith in God, or what we have believed about God can be a tough place to be. It can be unsettling, disorienting and frightening to come face to face with the question, "is this really true?" "Do I really believe this?"

It seems to me that for believers to be open to doubt and question about faith we need a good foundation, something that will hold the questions and the doubts, and for me I would use scripture such as, "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" or "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Or maybe Jesus words when he said, "I am the way the truth and the life." I think being open to

our faith doubts and making friends with our doubt needs to see Jesus as the foundation. An unshakeable commitment to following Jesus give us space to question and to wonder. Of course if you are working at embracing Jesus and the Bible then your quest is different. I make the assumption that I'm speaking to believers.

Maybe it's a little like our marriage commitment. When Sheldon & got married some 40 years ago, we thought we knew each other. We did in a few ways but we have come into a fuller knowledge of each other and we continue to get to know who we really are. In order for this relationship to be strong and to last we have had to work hard at it, we have butted heads, we have pushed and pulled, we have fought, and we have been silent. We have also had great times of connecting, celebrating our love, working and playing together, sharing with each other and with friends and family. It is living evolving relationship. We never said to each other, "I think we should quit, I don't believe in this relationship anymore, I'm done." Because our commitment was secure we had permission to test it, to question each other, to disagree with each other and by doing so strengthen and deepen our commitment to each other, and by God's grace and mercy we are still married.

So it is with our commitment with Jesus. We make a commitment to follow, to be disciplined by, and then we have the freedom to push out our questions not as an act of doubt but as an act of faith. As my 90 year old friend said, "truth remains the same, but application flexes."

While **what** we believe is very important, **who** we believe in is essential. If our foundation is Jesus Christ and him crucified and a walking example to live by, then that relationship will inform us how we live first with him and then out of that relationship live well with those around us. We hold to the foundational truth that Jesus is the center and we live out of that center. Because faith is evolving we can say that this is what I believe and hold closely to that truth, even while I join others in seeking God's truth and wisdom in all situations. This openness means that we join others in open and honest dialogue, truly to listen and learn and grow together as followers of Jesus- the one crucified, buried, and

resurrected. We join the dialogue to discern and grow, to create space for our faith to continue to form and deepen. Jesus is the truth, and our living out of that truth will help us to see others in light of Jesus' truth.

I see Jesus living and teaching a higher truth when the woman who was caught in adultery was brought to him. The men said, "The law says she must be stoned." Jesus knew the law, he knew what they said was true, but Jesus appealed to a higher standard, and that was to extend grace and forgiveness. He pushed the men to think higher than the law when he invited the one without sin to cast the first stone. He invited the men to doubt their law and think about the relationship.

Jesus was showing these men that his way of relating to sinners was indeed restoring, their way was the way of penalizing and judgment. Law holds accountable, but grace and forgiveness frees.

Our faith is often shaken when we experience painful losses, be it by death or by betrayal. Sit with someone who has prayed long and diligently for their child that was ill, and the child has died, or listen to the spouse who grieves the betrayal of the other to another, or lament with the friend who has been abused by someone they trusted. These and many more times when faith is tested and if we have faith only in **what** we have believed, and not **who** we have believed in we will lose faith.

Can we embrace a faith that says the world is complex and we will never get it all right, we will always need to say, "I might be wrong," or I don't see the whole picture, even when we hold our belief to be right. When we need to be absolutely certain of what we believe, we cannot be challenged to think bigger.

Knowing and studying scripture is a needful and worthy endeavor, but it should not be done so that we can hold others accountable to our way of believing, but allowing it to lead us to God through Jesus, and to sustain and strengthen our relationship with Jesus, our one true source of truth. If we indeed hold the love of the crucified Jesus, then we no longer need to try to convince ourselves that we hold the "right truth" but we are free to explore if our beliefs are really true according to Jesus and the way he lived.

When our foundation is “Jesus, crucified, & risen” then our commitment to follow Jesus in the law of love as he said in “I am the way the truth and the life” then we have room to question and doubt, test and investigate truths around that commitment.

The opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is certainty. To say we are absolutely right shuts down growth and a further search.

Just as Jesus invited Thomas to touch him, to take in the reality of who he was, so Jesus invites us to touch him, to embrace him, to walk in his ways, to declare that our love and devotion to this person informs and directs us to love.

As Thomas takes in Jesus he proclaims, “My Lord and my God.” A declaration of knowing, of experiencing first hand, an inner seeing that changed his life. Jesus came to Thomas in the way Thomas needed him to, not with rebuke, but with love.

Doubt is a good thing, for it starts our search, it asks for more. As we stand firmly on our foundation of “Jesus crucified, and risen” we too will experience the seeing and knowing of the person who deserves our allegiance and devotion and we like Thomas can say with confidence, “My Lord and my God.”

--Velma Swartz