

John 20:19-31

“Wanting to believe so badly, it hurts”

It's the week after Easter and the disheartened disciples are huddled in a Jerusalem house. The doors are dosed, locked against the hostile world outside. Guarding against any intrusion into their intimate circle, ten of the disciples are trying to convince Thomas, that not only have some of the women seen Jesus, risen from the dead, so have they. Into the discussion, Thomas lobbs the assertion for which he is most remembered, those infamous words ... “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.” [John 20:25b] You will note that Thomas doesn't say “cannot believe.” No, it's much more fiercely stated, “I **will not** believe.”



For these words, in the eyes of the faithful, for over 2000 years, Thomas has earned the nickname, “doubting Thomas.” Even people with little or no idea where the moniker comes from can be heard to scold another with “now, don't be a doubting Thomas.”

Perhaps it would be good for us to recall some other details about “good ole Thomas”. In so many ways, Thomas was a good man, maybe even one of the most steadfast of the chosen twelve. Remember – when Jesus asked Thomas to come along with him, Thomas left everything and followed, just as the others had done. Then, a few years later, when Jesus was going into dangerous, we could even say enemy territory, responding to the appeal of Mary and Martha on behalf of Lazarus who was dying, while the other disciples tried to get Jesus not to go, Thomas reacted differently. It was as though Thomas knew Jesus well enough to know that Jesus would go to his friends regardless of personal danger. Thomas' response was, “Let us go and die with him ...” (John 11:16). Thomas stepped forward, willing to risk his life with Jesus.

And later, when Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for what was ahead, trying to reassure them and give them hope and comfort, he said, “Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. ² 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? ³ 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. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.” [John 14:1-4] The other disciples don't respond – possibly because they don't get what Jesus is saying. However, Thomas, longing to be with Jesus, longing to stay with Jesus, comes back to Jesus with an almost passionate plea, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” [John 14:5b]

Doubting? Of course! But there's more in Thomas' heart. The enormity of the love he felt for Jesus, the outrageous grief that filled him every moment as he watched as Jesus was bound and flogged, ridiculed and crucified, speared and buried are poured into his words, “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.” [John 20:25b] The depth of his desperation not to allow his heart to know the pain of false hope was surpassed only by the depth and height and breadth of his love.

Perhaps that's true of all or most who have loved the Lord wholly, completely, with an aching and glorious love.

How does God deal with doubters? Are they to be dismissed summarily – cast out to fend for themselves until they somehow come to faith?

On Easter evening, Thomas told the others: “Unless I see for myself the nail prints; unless I put my hand in his side; I will not believe.” And a week later, when the disciples, Thomas among them this time, were again gathered behind locked doors, Jesus came and stood among them. Turning to Thomas He said, “Come ... touch ... believe.”

Sometimes I try to imagine what it must have been like for the disciples – to love and honour this man Jesus devoutly, even though all the chief priests of the religious world said he was a fake, a con artist. He had bled and cried out and died like an ordinary man with no more power, perhaps even less, than anyone else. Sometimes, I try to live into those three days when the world had seemingly triumphed over the death of this gentle and challenging man. Then, when the reports started coming in that Jesus had been seen and talked with, I try to picture how I would have reacted. Remembering that I had heard Jesus’ cries, with my own ears – seen Jesus suffer and die, with my own eyes. How would I have reacted to the words of the women and some of the disciples??

In my honest imaginings, I know that I would have stood with Thomas, filled with doubts, filled with an urgent need to see for myself, and in seeing and touching, to know.

Someone has written that believing is a process, that to believe, Christ must become more than a figure rising from the ashes of history whom we can adore. He must become a friend to whom we can talk, a guide who shows us a better way and a refuge upon whom we can cast our cares.

In this wonderful passage, did you notice that Jesus offers something to the disciples three times? “Peace be with you.” And after Thomas sees Jesus, and pledges his heart and soul to him, “My Lord and My God”, Jesus reminds them all of his continuing call to them. The week before, when Jesus had come to the ten, after blessing them a second time with “peace”, we read these words, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” [John 20:21b, 22]

In essence, Jesus was commissioning all who were gathered and who witnessed his resurrected form to become his body for the world – to witness through the Holy Spirit; to give the world the wholeness and healing, the forgiveness and hope that are available in Christ.

There is a world of people outside these walls who by their absence here are saying, “Unless I see for myself and touch and feel, I will not believe.” And Jesus would no more condemn them than he did Thomas. Nor would he take the attitude that until they bother to check things out for themselves, they’re on their own. Rather Jesus would come into the lives of his brothers and sisters and stand in the midst of them and invite them to see, touch and believe. The only thing is – Jesus chooses, now, to do this very thing through the Church, which is His body in the world. He would send us in and with the power of the Holy Spirit to live so that the world will see the sacrificial love of Jesus, will feel the woundedness that Jesus endured for our sins and theirs, for our healing and theirs, for our wholeness and theirs, for our salvation and theirs.

However, in order to be Christ’s body in the world, we need to know Him. We need to know him in a way that goes beyond the knowledge of Jesus as an historic figure who lived and died for us centuries ago, beyond the man who is recorded in the gospels, in wonderful, much loved stories. We need to get on the inside of Jesus, sharing his thoughts and feelings, his concern for us and all humanity. We need to know Him as we would a friend, a parent, a child.

And this kind of knowledge may begin with confessing, honestly, our doubts, as Thomas did. To confess to Jesus our struggles to know him is to invite Him to come through the locked, protective doors of our hearts. To invite Jesus into our hearts is to be open to life rich and

abundant.