

## **Staying Present**

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Today's reading from John's gospel is a very familiar story doubting Thomas. We give Thomas a hard time because he questions the resurrection when others have shared with them their experience of Jesus. but I think if we're honest with ourselves we can look back over our lives and find times, even as lifelong, devout Christians, we have had times of doubt. Even when you consider the Gospel stories around Jesus' resurrection we find a lot of doubt among the disciples, but only Thomas gets the title of doubter. So, I think we deserve to give Thomas another look. Maybe we can find a bit of ourselves in his story.

Doubt comes in many forms. For today's topic, I think I can find three possible sources of doubt in the story that can we learn from.

1. Doubt because of a traumatic experience that challenges our core beliefs.
2. Doubt because our experience is void or absent of what others claim they have experienced.
3. Doubt because we need faith needs to grow to stay relevant to our world.

I think Thomas could have experienced all three. Let me show you.

Thomas along with the other followers of Jesus have experienced a severe trauma to their faith. The faith tradition they had been raised in was vilifying their teacher and played a critical role in persecuting Jesus. They expected it from the Romans, but it may have been harder to believe that religious leaders would want Jesus dead. In John 11 we know that the dangers that Jesus is faced was present and powerful to the disciples. when word comes that Lazarus is sick the disciples warned Jesus not to go because of the trouble they experienced last time. But when Jesus says that Lazerus is dead, Thomas says let us go and be with Lazarus and die with him. He is very aware

of the dangers and even death threat on Jesus' life, but that didn't diminish the spiritual trauma that brought when Jesus dies.

There is also the religious trauma of watching the established religious authority actually oppose and even seek to vilify Jesus' ministry. Whenever we see religious leaders use their religious authority to abuse or victimize others for personal gain it can cause others to question their faith.

Today, as more and more reports of sexual abuse among clergy and cover ups by the institutions are coming out more people are questioning the truth of the Gospel. Child abuse cases, financial embezzlement by ministers or the blatant disregard for the core tenants of the gospel can cause people to question the validity of Christianity.

Another type of doubt that can happen is doubt in your own faith because you haven't had the deep personal, transformative experiences you hear others talk about. We hear how someone has had a vision or a spiritual encounter with God and now they are totally different. I believe their experiences and see the evidence of that change, but if I personally have not experienced such dramatic change, I may doubt my faith. I may wonder if there is something wrong with me.

Thomas hears these stories and perhaps wonders why he hasn't had an encounter. First Mary sees Jesus and the men on the road to Emmaus talk and break bread with Jesus. He leaves for some reason and when he returns to hear that everyone has seen Jesus except him. Perhaps he feels left out, or he feels that maybe there's something wrong with him. This kind of doubt can come especially for those who've grown up in the church and haven't had a super amazing transformative experience of conversion. Maybe you never needed to be delivered from life of crime on the streets and drugs. So, when life gets hard and the tried-and-true beliefs that you've grown up don't seem to cut it spiritually, you may doubt if you are missing something. Culturally we have experienced a slow de-centralization of the church in society. It is no longer the key social connection for families and business that it once was. Many people

knew that being a regular church attender was good for your career and standing in society. The importance of that is fading fast. In some circles it is a discredit even.

Sometimes doubt comes in because the world keeps changing and our firm beliefs begin to experience deep doubt. I call this the Galileo effect. The church and most of the known world once believed that the earth was the center of our planetary system and the sun revolved around earth. But then Galileo came along and proved with the new telescope that the sun was the center of our system not earth. This challenged that notion that the earth was a fixed thing of reality and was seen as contrary to Biblical truth. The Roman Catholic church challenged Galileo and others because it was contrary to biblical teaching. They were eventually excommunicated from the church in the mid-1600s. It took the Catholic Church nearly two hundred years to release all the documents and acknowledge Galileo's contributions to science. But it was not until 1992 before Pope John Paul II formally announce the church had erred in condemning Galileo and provided a pardon of sorts. That is nearly 400 years after his scientific theory was confirmed and adopted by other scientists. It became the standard scientific fact we all were taught in school soon there after. Advances in scientific understanding or a deeper social awareness that shift cultural norms often face religious opposition. The church has often struggled with being relevant to our lives and wrestling with our doubts is an important aspect of working through such struggles with our faith intact. Martin Luther King Jr said in the Letter from the Birmingham Jail, "the Church has been an echo rather than a voice, a tail light behind the Supreme Court and other secular agencies, rather than a headlight guiding men progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding." The Church tends to try and slam on the breaks rather than be the guiding light for love and justice in the world.

Even us, here at East and most Churches in this Post-modern and post COVID culture, are wondering if the church is still relevant. Looking at how Thomas gets through this can give us some insight. I have good news for you, when we are doubting, struggling, God desires to meet us where we are at.

So how did Jesus meet him where he was at? Thomas, in his doubt, names what he needs. He says, “I need to touch his wounds and see him for myself.” He is wanting an experience as tangible as the first time he met and followed Jesus. He needs God to confirm that what he is struggling with is real and valid. Touching his wounds would help Thomas know that his pain is valid but not the death of his faith. That is the resurrection he needed.

Secondly, Thomas needed to be patient. It takes time to overcome a deep doubt. Even amid Thomas’ doubt there is belief. I know this because he waits for it. If Thomas had totally abandoned his faith, he would not have stuck around. So here is the critical part of the story. Thomas also stays engaged with the community. He stayed around and remains vigilant along with the others. He had no guarantee that Jesus was going to show up again. He needed his faith community to support him while he struggled to believe. To assure him, he belonged with them even if he was full of doubt.

That is one of the reasons I love the statement. “Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” In the UCC we understand that faith is a journey with rough patches. We believe that the questions are just as important as definitive answers. We want our faith to be relevant and offer loving, caring, and insightful understanding into the troubles we face. We try to love people through those dark times. I would argue that we even need the doubters to deepen our own faith.

So if you find yourself struggling like Thomas I encourage you to name your need. Be patient while holding onto that ounce of faith you have. And most importantly stay present in the community. Don’t isolate yourself but talk about your struggles with others in this community. We, as your faith community, will seek to offer a caring, patient and listening ear. We will take seriously your struggles, giving you space to struggle, doubt, and even ask the hard questions without condemning you. I know I want this to be a place where we stay vulnerable and open to God coming in and becoming real to all of us in new and meaningful ways. Wherever you are on life’s journey.