Sunday, March 21, 1982
DOUBTING THOMAS (No. 3 in a Series)
John 20:24-31

There is a danger in doing a sermon series, particularly if the series runs too long. A pastor friend of mine once did a series of sermons that covered all the major and minor prophets — a total of seventeen. When he came to the prophet, Habakkuk, the 13th sermon in the series, he began his sermon — "This morning we are going to talk about the prophet Habakkuk, and where shall we place him?" When he paused for a breath after that unoriginal introduction, a man in the back of the church said out loud, "He can have my place, I'm going home!"

This sermon series won't be that long. Thus far in the series we've discussed Peter, Mary, the Unnamed Women, and today we are going to look at the disciple called Thomas. Next week the subject will be Judas.

Thomas is one of two of the twelve disciples whose name is used to describe a certain type of person. He is commemorated in the phrase — "doubting Thomas." Who is the other disciple whose name is used to describe a certain type of behavior? None other than Judas the traitor.

Altl1ough Thomas is noted for his doubting, we don't know too much else about'him. We know nothing about his parents, his family, or his background. The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell us nothing at all except his name. It is in the fourth Gospel, the gospel of John that he becomes a more clearly defined character.

In John's Gospel, Thomas is usually referred to as "Thomas who is called Didymus." Thomas is the Hebrew and Didymus is the Greek term for a twin. Who his twin sister or brother was, we do not know.

But here are some of the characteristics of Thomas as he emerges in the Gospel of John.

1. First of all, Thomas was a man of courage. We first meet him in the Lazarus story. News had come to Jesus and his disciples that their close friend Lazarus was very ill. In spite of this news, Jesus made no move to go to Lazarus and be of help. Then after waiting two days, Jesus prepared to go to Bethany where Lazarus lived. Jesus planned the trip so that he could stop in Bethany on the way to Jerusalem. But as Jesus and his disciples were about ready to begin the journey, news came that Lazarus had died.

To go to Jerusalem by stopping in Bethany now seemed foolish to the disciples. They knew that there were enemies in Jerusalem, just waiting to get at Jesus. Thus, the disciples tried to talk Jesus out of making the trip. To go to Jerusalem seemed a suicidal act of recklessness. Thomas was the only one of the twelve who seemed willing to go even though he knew it might mean death. He said, "let us go that we might die with him."

2. Secondly, Thomas was not afraid to ask questions. In the days before the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, he had tried to explain to his disciples what was going to happen and why and what lay beyond the cross. Among other things, Jesus said, "In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going."

It was Thomas who spoke first. He said without hesitation, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” It was a comment and question which the other disciples were afraid to ask. The answer Thomas received was, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

Thomas was the kind of person who could not live with an unasked question. And that’s a good quality in a human being. The art of gaining knowledge and understanding consists in asking the right questions. All of life is to ·be a learning experience, not only while we are in school, but no matter what we are doing or where we are. Learning is to be a life-long process and asking questions is integral to all learning.

We’ve all heard the old saying, “Ignorance is bliss,” but deep down we know that it is not true. As someone said, “If ignorance is bliss, why are so many people unhappy.” Another old saying is “What you don’t know won’t hurt you.” And so, some people do not worry about learning anything new

There’s a delightful story about a certain Mexican bank robber by the name of Jorge Rodriguez, who operated along the Texas border around the turn of the century. He was so successful in his foray that the Texas rangers put a whole extra posse along the Rio Grande to try and stop him.

Sure enough, late one afternoon, one of the Texas Rangers saw Jorge stealthily slipping across the river and trailed him at a discreet distance as he returned to his home village. He watched as Jorge mingled with the people in the square around the town well and then went into his favorite cantina to relax The Ranger slipped in and managed to get the drop on Jorge. With a pistol to his head, he said, “I know who you are, Jorge Rodriguez, and I have come to get back all the money you have stolen from the banks in Texas. Unless you give it to me, I am going to blow your brains out.” There was one fatal difficulty, however, Jorge did not understand or speak English and the Texas Ranger was not versed in Spanish. There they were, two adults at an utter verbal impasse.

About that time an enterprising little Mexican came up and said, “I am bilingual. Do you· want me to act as translator?” The ranger nodded and he proceeded to put the order of the Ranger into terms that Jorge could understand. Nervously, Jorge answered back in Spanish, “Tell the big Texas Ranger that I have not spent a cent of the money. If he will go to the town well, face north, count down five stones, he will find a loose one there. Pull it out and all the money is behind the stone. Please tell him quickly.” The little translator got a solemn look on his face and said to the Ranger in perfect English, “Jorge Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die.”

As Jorge found out, what we do not know most assuredly does hurt us. Thomas knew that and was not afraid to ask questions to gain new knowledge.

3. And thirdly, Thomas was a person who was not afraid to doubt. What was behind his doubt? Thomas had not been present on that first Easter Sunday evening when the Risen Christ appeared to the other disciples. When Jesus had died upon the cross, and when it seemed that the end had finally come, Thomas’s only desire was to be alone. He had no expectations of anything else happening.

Later when Thomas had rejoined the other disciples and they told him about seeing the Risen Christ, he replied that he would not believe unless he actually saw and touched and handled

the nail prints in Jesus'hands and the gash in his side. Thomas wanted to see for himself before he got his hopes up again.

Thomas did meet the Risen Christ about eight days later and Jesus didn't criticize him for his doubting, rather he invited Thomas to touch his scars and he became a believer.

Two important truths emerge from the story and experience of Thomas which also apply to us.

1. First, there's nothing wrong with being a doubter. To be a thinking person is to have doubts. Everyone doubts, skeptic and believer, pulpit and pew. Jesus Christ never said to a person — "You must have no doubts." In fact, genuine doubt is the beginning point of faith.

We human beings are creatures with minds which search for truth. Therefore, we have our doubts and at the same time we long for certainty and security.

We all know that it's difficult to live with doubts. We have a strong desire for certainty which can cause us to put aside all doubt. It can then cause us to misuse the Bible and attempt to n.ke it into a visible external answer book. In so doing we make it something it was never meant to be.

We not only do this with the Bible but with some individuals as well. You may have heard about a man named Bill Gothard who was filling auditoriums across the country with twelve thousand people at a time. These individuals would sit for thirty hours of monological instruction in one week's time. When you anal1ze the secret of his approach, it comes down to a timeless form of legalism. He has all the correct answers backed up with Biblical references — there is no room for any doubt at all or any questions.

This lust for certitude causes some people to join religious cults because they promise to remove all doubt and uncertainty about life and about God. Cults usually have a living charismatic leader who says that he or she has been given new exclusive revelations about God and the world. The leader's authority is not to be doubted or questioned by anyone. Here is total certainty. Anyone who does not believe the leader's teachings is not only wrong, but on the side of the devil.

I like Thomas because he was not afraid to doubt and to openly express his doubts. Uncertainty is built into all of life. Even in our everyday ordinary existence, there is little that is truly certain. Remember the old cliche, "Nothing is certain except death and taxes."

As far as our religious faith is concerned, the lack of certitude about the nature of God actually represents a healthy respect for the dangers of substituting human forms for holy substance. God can never be totally described or experienced or totally understood. There is always more to God than we can see or know.

Furthermore, honest doubt is what keeps us open to new truth. New knowledge most often comes from questioning what everyone else accepts as the obvious. Also, doubt your doubts.

2 Secondly, notice that Thomas was a believer as well as a doubter. So also, it is with us. We are believers as well as doubters. There is a story about an atheist who, when asked if he were a Christian, replied angrily: "No, I'm an atheist, thank God."

We are all believers in one thing or another. Peter Berger says in his book. “RUMOR OF ANGELS” that if a child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds herself surrounded by darkness, alone, afraid, and cries out for her mother, then the mother will come and cradle the child in her arms. She will turn on a lamp which will encircle the scene with a warm glow of reassuring light. She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same, “Don’t be afraid, everything is in order, everything is all right.” If all goes well, the child will be reassured, her trust in reality recovered, and will go back to sleep.

Is the mother lying to her child? No, the mother believes that everything will be all right. She is believing in a transcendent dimension, an order to life. She may of course have doubts about all of this as well as belief. The scientist or scholar believes that he or she can gain more knowledge. The artist believes in beauty and devotion to beauty. We are all believers as well as being doubters.

And like Thomas our belief is always vulnerable, for we are finite, our sight dims, and our faith falters. One moment we believe and trust in God, and in the next moment doubts come.

Thus, the world is really not divided into believers and doubters, but rather we all live in a faith-doubt tension. And this tension between faith and doubt cannot every be fully resolved in this life. After all there is mystery within us and around us and beyond us. The only way to evade doubt is to quit thinking and feeling and that attempt never fully succeeds.

There are no final proofs of God, just as there are no final and absolute proofs for what most of us believe in.

It is said that Sinclair Lewis some years ago on a public platform dared God to strike him dead. Then, when nothing happened, he said in effect, “There, you see, there is no such God.” But of course, the argument could have gone in the other direction, as indeed Sinclair Lewis was there with intent to prove; “Only a God of infinite patience and love would endure such nonsense and let him go on living.”

We don’t know much about Thomas after his encounter with the Risen Christ. But we can assume that he became a devoted disciple. Legend has it that he went to India and died there after he had started many churches.

Thomas was a doubter but also a believer and remember it was never an argument that removed Thomas’s doubt, rather it was an experience. Amen.

Some Discussion Questions

1. What are some of your most puzzling doubts?

2. What are some of your strongest beliefs?

3. Discuss some of the events and experiences in your life which have strengthened your faith. Also discuss such events and experiences which have caused you more doubts.

4. If you could ask God personally any question, what would be that question?