

Responding to Grace: The Room to Doubt

John 20:19-31

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When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them 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 hand, 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 be unbelieving 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."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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When I was an Associate Pastor in Richmond, Virginia there were a couple of weeks during the year that I knew I could count on preaching. One of those was around the 28th of December. The other was the Sunday after Easter.

There is a little more room in the pew today, isn't there? Last week the place was packed. Between all of our services, there were over 1,500 people who came to worship. Why do you think that is? Do you think it was because people's mommas and daddies made them come to church? Maybe. But I think the more accurate reason people show up en masse on Easter Sunday is because they are – to quote the great theologian Karl Barth – asking themselves the question that most every Christian asks at one time or another: “is it true.”

I wonder if any of those folks who were asking themselves that question last week are here today. That's a bit rhetorical. I have a hunch there are people who worship here 52 weeks a year who ask themselves that question on a regular basis. Today's scripture reading is a story that should give comfort to those of us who might have a restless faith. It is a story about Thomas. Really, it is a story about Jesus – who meets Thomas where he is. Listen with me for the word of God as we find in the 21st chapter of John's gospel...just after the first Easter Sunday...

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To those who enjoy following the scripture reading in your pew Bibles, you may have noticed that I translated a word a little differently than what you have in print.

In response to Thomas's request, after showing him the scars of his crucifixion on his resurrected body, Jesus said: “do not be unbelieving, but believe.” The unbelieving part gets mistranslated as “doubt.” Thus, the name that has stuck with this disciple for thousands of years: Doubting Thomas.

Thomas gets a bad rap. Mary Magdalene got to see Jesus in the garden on Easter morning, his other disciples had an encounter with him behind closed

doors when Thomas was out running an errand – so can you blame the guy for wanting to see a little proof?

It is not that he doubted, he just had the courage to say what he needed in order to believe. Thomas is like the kid in the class who throws his hand up in the air to raise the question that is on everybody’s mind, but that nobody has the guts to ask. For his willingness to state his needs Thomas gets labeled “the doubter” for eternity. I think that is a pretty raw deal.

What I find remarkable about this story is not Thomas’ question, but Jesus’ response. Did you notice? Jesus does not sound perturbed, or put out, or even surprised by Thomas’ request.

Thomas asked to see the mark on Jesus’ hands; Jesus showed him his hands.

Thomas wanted to see the wounds on Jesus’ side; Jesus showed him his side.

Jesus gave Thomas what he said he needed to believe – not begrudgingly, or with qualification – but exactly in the way that Thomas said he needed it.

And in response, Thomas offers what is the fullest confession of faith in the entire gospel of John, “my Lord and my God!” – becoming the first person to call Jesus God.

How do you think that confession of faith came about for Thomas?

I think it happened because Jesus gave Thomas permission to express his questions and his needs in such a way that it led him to claim his faith.

Faith is a gift. It is given by God. It cannot be earned or learned.

But it can be awakened, it can be nurtured, and it can be developed by an environment that leaves space for people to say or ask the things that they need.

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I want to tell you a little bit about my journey of faith.

The first church I belonged to was just down the road at Myers Park Presbyterian. My two strongest memories of Myers Park are the taste of the

communion bread (my sister and I would always eat the leftovers from the communion table), and Randy Taylor (who was the senior pastor and my parent's boss).

Though I could not tell you the first thing about what Randy preached in his sermons (I was six!), I can say with confidence that Randy was the kind of preacher who gave members of the church permission to ask their questions of faith. Randy seemed to me professorial – he smoked a pipe and had lots of books in his library – but he wasn't the kind of pastor who you would go to for answers. He was more of a guide. He knew what he believed, and he was a steward of our tradition, but his interest seemed in engaging the congregation with the faith instead of indoctrinating them with his knowledge.

The church of my youth was a new church development project in the Charlotte suburbs with 200 members. This was the church where I went through confirmation (with my father as a teacher!), where I was active in the youth group, where I started going to Montreat Youth Conferences. It was also the church where I started to ask lots of questions about my faith.

My youth leader, an insurance salesman who loved working with teenagers, was a man named Rodger Epps. Rodger and his wife Susie helped to start a youth program in that new church that became the backbone of my faith. Sunday nights we would have 25 people show up, more than 10% of the congregation! They created an atmosphere of love and respect where members of the group felt like they belonged. Church became a safe space – it became “our space.”

The main way I remember engaging my faith in that youth group was by debate. We would pick an issue – something juicy and controversial – and discuss it...using what we knew about the Bible, the Presbyterian Church, and our own, self-righteous opinions. I am sure the arguments were pretty terrible – but that wasn't the point. Rodger helped provide us a platform to give voice to our questions and worries and hopes about what it meant to follow Jesus in the real world.

In college I was part of the Presbyterian Campus Ministry at the University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I am actually going there this evening to spend a week studying with my preacher friends. University Presbyterian Church paid to have an associate pastor on their staff dedicated

to campus ministry. The church hosted our group in their building – letting us take over the place on Thursday nights. My campus minister’s name was Ollie Wagner. Ollie was a goofball with a great education. He nurtured the students who became a part of that group by giving us leadership responsibilities and integrating what we were learning across the street in our undergraduate studies with what was being taught in the church. We worshipped, studied, played, and went on mission trips. I met a pretty young co-ed named Lindsey. Ollie was one of the pastors in our wedding in that church.

I share all of this with you to illustrate the central place of the church in helping me claim my faith. I went to seminary and became a pastor because of the congregations, Sunday school teachers, youth advisors, and mentors that provided me space to think, to explore, to question, and wrestle with the faith that I now proclaim.

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Not everyone needs to have this kind of space, but many people do; I did. For me, Thomas’ story is personal because I resonate with his need to raise the question that others are afraid to ask. I have often found myself slightly jealous of Thomas because the one who was there to offer what he needed to believe was the Word made flesh.

But if I understand this text, what Jesus and the gospel writer John do on the heels of this encounter with Thomas is empower the Church to be the place that grants permission for people to say what they need to believe.

“Have you believed because you have seen me?” Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have come to believe.”

We are the one who have not seen.

John continues: “But these [stories] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

If you ever wondered why Bible study was important – there’s your first clue.

As the Church, we are entrusted with the story of this book. It is a story about God’s commitment to his people, about God’s claim on our lives in Jesus Christ,

and about the way those who follow Jesus are called to live and love in the world that God created. As John suggests, faith that comes from the gift of this story brings life – and it is this life that the Church of Jesus Christ is responsible to share.

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In our time, I think a faith that gives room for questions and resists easy, pat answers is a faith that has the resilience to make a difference in people's lives. And, hopefully, make a difference in the world.

About a year and a half ago, I heard a great sermon by a wise Presbyterian pastor who talked about the order in which we come to know the truth. In the last 500 years or so we have led people to believe that in order to believe you had to start with understanding the truth. Then, you explored it. Then, you noticed that it was beautiful.

But before we western, enlightened Europeans put our stamp on the faith, people used to think that - in fact - you start with the beautiful. Then you explored it. Then...after a long, long time...you come to understand "it" as truth. I think the people who will be filling these pews in the next 20-30 years will find this to be a more accurate description of their spiritual journey.

We live in a world that has less and less familiarity with our traditions or faith in general. We live in a world that has a lot of folks like Thomas – people who are working out their beliefs; people who need space to state what they need; to raise their questions; to be heard.

Jesus commissioned the church to be his body – to meet people where they are and to give them what they need so that they might believe.

I hope we can be that place.

I hope that we can open our doors and our hearts and our minds to receive the questions of those who are searching for their faith.

And I think we will be.

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Amen.

