

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Mary Margaret Porter**  
**John 20: 19-31**  
**“Both Sides of the Story”**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 12, 2015**

I sympathize with Thomas. You see, I am a skeptic at heart. I would much rather see and touch myself than take someone else's word for it. In fact, my interest in going to seminary in the first place arose from reading a book entitled, Walking the Bible by Bruce Feiler. In his book, Feiler, a Jewish author, walks the path of the Israelites from their captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land. Along the way he stops at many of the places made famous in scripture to explain their significance and how they are viewed and revered even today. I was SHOCKED. I mean really. Never in my life of hearing the stories of the Bible did I imagine that you could actually visit and see the places described there – but during his journey, Feiler visits the purported sight of the garden of Eden, he climbs Mount Sinai, he visits the dome of the rock where many believe the binding of Isaac took place, and he tastes manna – actual manna! Which historians and scientists theorize is the result of a beetle infestation in a tamarisk tree – kind of a heavenly sent beetle-laced sweet sap – which Bedouin still collect and eat – sounds delicious right!

But back to the point – I began to think, if these locations were real, what other truths could be found in scripture – if these seemingly little things were true, what about the big things in the Bible that I had always questioned – the incarnation? Miracles? The resurrection? Maybe there was real evidence of those as well!

So many questions – I had to know more! And what better place to get them answered than at a revered Divinity School like Duke . . . or so I thought. I came in with a list of questions I wanted concrete answers for. Where does evil come from? How exactly did Moses part those waters and why has no one done it since? How did Christ's death and resurrection save me? But I found that as many questions as I asked, there arose ten more and then ten more from there. And with every adequate answer I was taught or came to in my own mind, another student would have a completely different idea of that correct answer and could point to scripture to back him or her up. Seriously, did no one KNOW this? Could no one give me definite answers; if not these professors and peers, then certainly Scripture? But the more I looked, the more I uncovered simply more questions. I was so dejected and frustrated I thought about leaving seminary.

I was on my way home from Duke to Charlotte to talk with my family one Sunday and I happened to be listening to WDAV on the radio. I can't even tell you which scripture it was, but Alan Brindisi was preaching a sermon on doubt and questioning one's faith. He described his own faith as a journey in which questions were an integral part. He explained how his questioning encouraged him to dig deeper into his faith, to be challenged and to learn more. I was so impressed that a pastor would be so confident and so seemingly content with his questioning that he would proclaim it from a pulpit. I decided that day that if he could preach doubt from such a public platform surely I could stay in seminary for another two years to see where this questioning and doubt might lead me.

Although I never had the opportunity to meet Alan, I did write him a note after that car trip to tell him what an impact his sermon had on me. He sent me a wonderfully encouraging response and so I stand here today confident that he was correct. It is ok, in fact, I believe God WANTS us to question our faith.

I believe that if God wanted our faith journey to be easy, God could have simply written an instruction manual for faith. Instead, we are presented with a nuanced scripture passed down and dictated orally and in many different languages, from generation to generation over thousands of years. A scripture that even seems to contradict itself sometimes –

In it we meet a leader/prophet/Messiah who speaks in parable and often encourages his disciples to keep quiet and to not explain who he is or his actions to others. And we also learn of a faith, which was birthed and nurtured in the margins of the greater society and one at odds with the prevailing way of life at the time.

Even today we live a faith in constant challenge to societal norms – a faith where what we say we believe and what we often do are at odds with one another – where even we ourselves as Christians, or even Presbyterians, can't decide who is in and who is out – who is right or wrong. It is a wonder that our faith has survived at all. But it has – and has flourished for over two thousand years. There can be no doubt about that.

But let me back up, this all begins with Thomas. Thomas is perhaps the least understood and one of the most maligned of the disciples. But there is no one quite like Thomas. He is kind of like the Eyore of the disciples. He is a natural skeptic, often leaning toward pessimism. His mind is full of questions and even answers that are acceptable to most everyone else do not satisfy him. He is an analyst. He is a scientist.

Almost everything we know about Thomas is found in the Gospel of John. John's main concern in his gospel is moving people from fear and doubt to faith, so Thomas is a natural study. In the eleventh chapter of John, Jesus has just informed the disciples of the death of their friend Lazarus, and then tells them that he is going to Bethany to raise him from the dead. But the disciples are aware that Bethany is only a few miles from Jerusalem, and the officials are seeking to put Jesus to death. Going there will mean that all of them will be placed in harm's way. The rest of the disciples just sit in stunned silence at Jesus' announcement – they are afraid and don't want to go. But John writes, "Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'" (John 11:16). In effect he says, "We are all going to die. I just know it. But I would rather follow this man to my death than stay back alone." Thomas always expects the worst, but this time his pessimism is rooted in true faith.

The next time we meet Thomas it is in the Upper Room where Jesus and his disciples have just eaten their last supper together. When Judas to begin his journey of betrayal, Jesus tells them that he will not be with them much longer. Then he says, "I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:1-4). At this point Thomas has had all he can take. He nearly shouts in frustration, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas wants a map – an address to plug into his GPS. And Jesus' reply is typical of Jesus – cryptic and simple, "I am the way..."

Darn Jesus and his riddles - You can't help feeling that Thomas finds this answer less than satisfactory. Jesus wasn't a way, he was a man. I am sure that Thomas was not a fan of Jesus' parables.

And here we find the disciples again and they are huddled in a room with locked doors, afraid that the authorities will soon be after them. John tells the story like this, "Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe'" (John 20:24-27).

The interesting thing is that the Scripture never says anything about Thomas accepting Jesus' invitation to touch his wounds so that he might believe. All we know is that all Thomas could say was, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), and Jesus seems to consider this enough.

Then Jesus asked a question of his own. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" he said and then added, addressing himself to all the generations that have come since, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).

However, this pronouncement of uncertainty bestowed upon Thomas the title, "Doubting Thomas" for the past two millennium. But to single Thomas out as the doubting one looks to be seriously unfair. He was one of the doubting eleven, no worse than the rest of them, and possibly a bit braver. The other disciples believed in the resurrection not through blind faith but because they had all witnessed him together. Thomas was just asking to see what they had already seen.

But "Doubting Thomas" has come to be viewed in a critical way - a way to characterize those who do not have faith. This perspective holds that it is somehow bad or wrong to doubt - as if Christianity is a black and white experience - either you believe or you doubt. This approach to faith does not allow for any gray area or room to grow.

The reality is that doubt and faith go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. We even heard Jesus doubting God's presence on Palm Sunday during the Passion as he cries out, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"

Rather than being the scapegoat among the disciples, Thomas is, for me, the hero among them. For me, Thomas will always stand for the person who gets the news second hand, the person who wasn't there when the miracle happened. We sing that old hymn, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And I answer, "No, I wasn't. I was not there." Which is why I find Thomas such a powerful witness. Thomas dares to express for me, perhaps for many of us, the real doubts that can drift through our minds, whether it really happened?

There may be no question in our minds that Jesus was with us in the past. The question is rather whether Jesus was resurrected and is still with us: Emmanuel, God with us?

I suspect that many of us have found ourselves, more than once, on a lonely path where, it seems, doubt is found around every corner, uncertain of where God is. Where is the risen Lord when a marriage is ending, when addiction or depression seems to be taking over, or when a loved one dies too soon? Where is the risen Lord in the throws of war, terror, disease, or famine?

Even within the church, torn by doctrinal and theological differences, some might ask - where is the risen Lord? We, like the apostle Thomas, may find it hard not to doubt - it seems so hopeless.

But it is precisely by our questioning that we find our way to deeper faith. There will always be mysteries and miracles of religion that baffle our minds. There will always be problems that we encounter in life, in our scriptures or in our church that will make us doubt what we once believed. But as Rachel Held Evans, a writer and columnist notes, "doubt is the mechanism by which faith is evolved. Doubt makes us more

humble and more dependent on Christ.” She notes, “I am grateful for doubt. Doubt keeps faith alive and thinking - whereas certainty just freezes it.” 19th Century Spanish writer and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno puts it like this: *“Life is doubt. And faith without doubt is nothing but death.”*

Our doubt leads us to be in communion with and ask questions of God; to read scripture with an open mind to the Holy Spirit to reveal something new. Doubt provides us the humility to know that we may not always have it right or that there may be the possibility of many truths. Doubt proves that as much as we would like to believe we are – we are not perfect. Doubt encourages us to ask questions of one another and to reach out to one another for support and hope.

You see we stand on both sides of the story today. We stand with Thomas wanting so much to believe the unbelievable but unable to fully grasp the miracle. So we, like Thomas, ask to see it - to reach out to touch the body – the body of Christ – we yearn for the conviction and faith to fall at God’s feet crying out My Lord . . . and My God!

And we also stand on the other side of the story as part of the body of Christ, patient and loving. It is not incidental that we, Jesus’ followers, are called, “The Body of Christ.” You see, without the physical presence of Christ to see and touch, we ourselves become Christ’s body in the world. Our hope and call for peace in a world filled with chaos, our acts of love and compassion toward those who are ill or troubled, our words of encouragement and acceptance for those who are persecuted or marginalized – these are the things that allow us and our neighbors to move beyond doubt to faith – to touch, see and feel Christ’s resurrected body in the world.

And because we stand on both sides of the story - because we have doubts and faith - we don't need to have it all figured out before helping out a neighbor, or feeding someone who is hungry, or standing up for injustice, or even coming to worship. If we had to figure it all out ahead of time, then we would never get show up or started. For there is doubt even in our acts of faith.

There are so many hungry people -- will the few I can help really change things? There is so much hurt in the world -- does the hand I extend or listening ear I offer really change that?

The doubt of St. Thomas is described in the eastern orthodox tradition as “blessed”, for it was not a doubt that resisted the truth, but one that desperately desired a truthful answer –a “doubt which gave birth to faith.” Jesus’ meeting with St. Thomas was to be a milestone in the history of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

However, what is all too common in our world today are the many people who haven’t yet encountered the body of Christ, not because they aren’t looking, but because the church hasn’t been the visible, present body of Christ for them. Worse yet, there are many people who have been damaged when the most visible parts of the church do not preach or practice the love and compassion of Jesus. So what can we do? Someone once said, “Faith is a series of doubts vanquished by small acts of love.”

Yes, I believe that these little things, these small acts of love, when added together do make a big difference. These little things can change the world. And that, it seems to me, that is what the story of Thomas shows us and reminds us - that in the midst of our doubt – we can still reach out and touch Christ, even become Christ’s body in the world for others, just as Thomas did. For when Thomas got up from crying ‘my Lord and My God’ he got to work traveling to the far reaches of the known world to show others what he had seen – the risen body of Christ. He did this by living as part of Christ’s body here on earth. He did it by carrying on Christ’s message of love and forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.orthodoxherald.com/2011/12/11/doubting-thomas/>

Skeptical, doubting, faithful Thomas, points the way for us to be both honest doubters and worthy disciples. As he holds out his empty hands to touch the broken Christ... he himself is transformed to become Christ's body in the world, broken and marked, and yet alive and full of hope and love. In this way – on both sides of the story may be found the real Truth of our faith.

Oh and as it turns out, I had the opportunity near the end of seminary to go to the Middle East and visit many of the places written about in the book *Walking the Bible*. I even climbed Mt. Sinai. But I did not find God in the rocks or ruins I saw there. These relics were not the answers. I found God in the fellowship and sharing of community among those I traveled with - A group of diverse seminary students, black and white, male and female, southern Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian, and with our guides, Jews, Muslims and Christians. I discovered in the end that the truth does lie in the ground waiting to be discovered by archeologists – the Truth is alive and working in the world today in each and every one of us.

I always like to include an Affirmation of Faith in worship as a way to ground our faith together. But I wondered if an affirmation was appropriate on a day when we are talking about 'Doubting Thomas.' However, I believe that Thomas had the most truthful and heartfelt affirmation of faith in human history when, upon encountering the risen Christ, he fell to his knees and shouted "my Lord and My God!" The mystery still existed for Thomas as it does for us to day, yet we, the body of Christ, with Thomas, are confident affirm what we believe in the midst of our doubt and mystery. With that, let us stand and say together the Affirmation of Faith taken from our denomination's confession of 1967.

**God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery, which the Scriptures describe in various ways. These are expressions of a truth, which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for humankind. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God's reconciling work.**

**The risen Christ is the savior of all people. Those joined to him by faith are set right with God and commissioned to serve as God's reconciling community. Christ is head of this community, the church, which began with the apostles and continues through all generations.**