

Blessed Are the Doubters
 Mark 9:14-27; John 20:19-29
 Second Sunday of Easter, (April 27) 2025
 Kyle Childress

*I believe and
 Interrupt my belief with
 Doubt. I doubt and
 Interrupt my doubt with belief.*

-Denise Levertov

from “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus”

Not many of us have patron saints anymore – at least not in our baptist branch of the church, but if we did, Thomas would be one of our favorites. Thomas, better known as “Doubting Thomas” based upon this Gospel story we’ve read this morning is a disciple of Jesus we can relate to. A week after the resurrection of Jesus, Thomas was beset by doubts and needed a sign. Two thousand years after the resurrection of Jesus we too are beset by doubts.

Thomas is nicknamed “Didymus,” which is Greek for “twin.” Literally, the word means “double,” and some scholars think it refers to Thomas being double-minded about everything. Another way to put it, is that he was always asking questions. He’s careful; maybe even skeptical. He wants to see what’s “on this hand” as well as what’s “on the other hand.”

Sure enough, back in John 11 when Jesus announces they are heading to Bethany because Lazarus has died, Thomas gets a little cynical. They all know how dangerous that will be. Thomas says, “*Let us also go, that we may die with*

him” (John 11:16). Not clear whether he means Lazarus or Jesus, but it’s a pretty cynical thing to say. Later in the upper room, after Jesus has washed their feet, and instituted the Lord’s Supper, he tells them not to be afraid, because he is going to prepare a place for them. Thomas interrupts, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” to which Jesus replies, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:5-6). So, it comes as no surprise that when the other disciples tell Thomas on Easter Sunday evening, “*We have seen the Lord!*” Thomas replies, “*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 20:25). Thomas is not just a contrarian, you know, one of those annoying people whose default habit is always to disagree. No, Thomas is an honest, authentic question asker.

Part of me wonders if it is not so much that he doubts the resurrection as much as he mistrusts the other disciples. Truth is, given what we know about those guys, who can blame him? On top of it all Thomas is grieving, and he’s isolated and excluded. For whatever reason, that first Easter evening Thomas was not there. Perhaps he was like so many of us when we become discouraged, grieving, and depressed, we tend to stay home, close the curtains, and not be around anyone else. Of course, that’s the very time we need to be around others the most. In Thomas’s case, he missed the resurrected Lord by isolating himself.

I also think Thomas was disappointed, and most likely even worse – in despair. A lot of our doubts grow out of our disappointment with God, especially when we are suffering in some way. Life has a way of showing us where our faith has been misplaced. And by every account we know, these disciples, including Thomas, have been through some of the most disappointing, traumatic, and disillusioning experiences anyone could know over their previous two weeks.

Disillusionment is the product of illusion, which raises the question of how much of our own faith is more illusion or even wishful thinking, not grounded in scripture or theology and in the tradition of the church but in those childish warm fuzzies we mistake for faith.

I once was in a restaurant and overheard at the next table two guys talking. One said, “Well, I don’t know much but I do know it is Jesus over the Devil.” And he was correct: he didn’t know much. When the rough times come, and they will come, it is going to take a faith more deeply rooted in scripture and the worship of the church across the ages.

Even in his day, Thomas was not alone. People had doubts about the resurrection from the very beginning. Listen to Matthew, when Jesus gathers the disciples to give the great commission just before he ascends to heaven: “*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*” (Matt 28:16-17). Sure, there are lots of atheists and agnostics outside the church. They don’t believe any of it. But even within the church, even among the so-called heroes of the faith, there have always been those who doubt.

Poet Denise Levertov has a poem I read every year around the Second Sunday of Easter, called, “St. Thomas Didymus,” in which she imagines Thomas being a witness earlier in Jesus’ ministry, when Jesus comes down off the mountain in Mark 9 and encounters the father with a son who as Mark says has “a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.”

Mark says, “And at that very moment, it happened again. The little boy had a seizure and fell down.” And his father is surely cradling him when he says, “If you are able to do anything, have pity and help us.”

Jesus responds, “Anything is possible for the one who believes.” And now, the man begins to weep; he and his faith and his love and his desperate hope for his son are now the focus.

So, there he is, loving his little son enough to walk through the fires of hell for him, enough to die for him, and it turns out that his son’s life depends not on his bravery, but on his faith. And so, for the love of his son, he blurts out the most honest confession I’ve ever heard: “I believe; help my unbelief.”

Denise Levertov imagines Thomas being there at that very moment when this father utters this plea, this prayer: “I believe; help my unbelief.” She imagines Thomas thinking, “I believe and/ Interrupt my belief with/ Doubt. I doubt and/ Interrupt my doubt with belief.” She imagines Thomas seeing that father as his twin in faith and doubt.

Flannery O’Connor wrote a letter to a friend in which she said, “I believe; help my unbelief” is the “foundation prayer of faith.” She went on, “Let me tell you this: faith comes and goes. It rises and falls like the tides of an invisible ocean. If it is presumptuous to think that faith will stay with you forever, it is just as presumptuous to think unbelief will” (*The Habit of Being*, p. 476, 452).

Theologian Douglas John Hall said, “No Biblical verse is more existentially meaningful . . . than this prayer, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” (*Thinking the Faith*, p. 250).

The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick had a famous sermon called “The Importance of Doubting Your Doubts:” Fosdick says: “[I write] for the encouragement of someone struggling with unbelief... The noblest faith of the church has come out of that struggle. You don’t really possess the Christian faith until you have fought for it.” (Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Importance of Doubting our Doubts” in *What is Vital in Religion*, pp. 55-56).

Hear me. Faith is hard. Sometimes it takes all we have and it takes being around others who also struggle with faith and doubt, belief and unbelief.

I believe it means learning to live with paradox. The father of the convulsing boy in Mark 9 and Thomas here in John 20 have faith and doubt at the same time. For most of us, at one time or another, including me, it is not faith or doubt, it is faith and doubt.

Levertov writes: *We live in terror/ of what we do not know,/ in terror of not knowing,/ ... Yet our hope lies/ in the unknown,/ in our unknowing.// O deep, remote unknown,/ O deep unknown,/ Have mercy upon us.* (“Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus,” *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, p. 673).

The poet John Keats in a letter to a friend in 1817, wrote what he called “negative capability.” He defined it this way: “Negative Capability, that is when a man [person] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” For Keats, this meant being able to lose ourselves in the moment and in beauty. To give up assumptions and give up trying to know every fact and reason, and learn to be content with partial truth, partial insight. It means giving up control and as Keats said, “irritable reaching.” Or differently, it means giving up control and giving up angry efforts at regaining control. A modern biographer called it “tolerance for ambiguity.” Another scholar

said negative capability is about “resisting the temptation to make up our minds on everything, and have always ready a neat answer” (*English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins, p. 1208-1209 and note 26 on p. 1209).

I love something the poet Rilke said once, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and learn to love the questions themselves.” (see William Sloane Coffin, *Courage and Love*, p. 7).

But to love the questions themselves, to be content with negative capability, of living with the paradox of not knowing all the answers, of learning to be comfortable with doubt as well as faith, means giving up control. It’s hard. And these days there are a lot of people angry about loss of control. When we feel like we’re losing control we get mad and we get our guns.

One of things so worrisome about White Christian Nationalism and Fundamentalism is the overwhelming need for control and certitude. Something happens to religious faith that has no room for doubt; something not very pleasant, nor, in my opinion, faithful. It becomes exclusive. It circles the wagons and looks inward. It begins to focus on keeping out those who don’t measure up, who might be different or who might be asking questions. It invests its energy building walls, not bridges.

The philosopher Pascal quipped, “I am astonished at the boldness with which men undertake to speak of God.” And theologian William Placher reminds us that an important part of our Christian theological tradition is that God, even when revealing Godself to us, remains hidden, mysterious; that, as St. Augustine noted, centuries ago, “If you understand, it is not God.” Martin Luther named it the “hiddenness of God,” and taught that faith is the acceptance of insecurity, living in trust of a God who remains a mystery. Placher guesses that Luther would call the

doubters the most authentic believers. (*The Domestication of Transcendence*, p. 51).

One of my favorite writers is Rebecca Solnit, who urges us to practice letting go and lingering in uncertainty. As she puts it, practice getting lost. To let go of control and enter into the unknown implies an openness to what might happen or not. The unknown is not necessarily bad; it is just not known. But it also means that perhaps something else might be known. Something new can be learned or experienced.

Doubt as part of faith keeps us humble and reminds us we don't know everything and do not need to know everything. We are called, not to live by certitude, but by faith, by trust. In our humility and openness, God is able to teach us something new, something we've never known before.

And let me give you some advice. Don't try to "lone ranger" it like Thomas. Faith in following Christ, and practicing resurrection is hard enough in community where we are together, where we pray for one another, do Bible study and worship together, and give each other hugs, serve others, forgive one another, and drink coffee with one another. To try to do it alone, isolated, is well-nigh impossible.

John tells us that this second Sunday of the resurrection, when Thomas was back with the rest of the disciples, Jesus, the Living Christ, walked right through the door out of the darkness and stood among them saying, "Peace be with you." Then he invited Thomas to touch his scars and said, "Thomas, don't doubt but believe." John writes that Thomas responded, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Then Jesus said to the disciples, across the centuries, including you and me, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).

When I was a little boy, I remember many a night sitting at my grandparent's dinner table in the kitchen, usually, with all kinds of home-cooking on the table. The kitchen was warm from my grandmother's cooking, so often, especially if it was cool outside, my grandmother kept the kitchen door open. The screen was closed but the door was open to the dark outside. Sometimes a couple of cats were hanging around on the porch, and from time to time, my grandmother would open the screen door and throw some table scraps out to them. One time she did that very thing, came back in, and matter of factly said to my grandfather who was named Dub, "Dub there's a 'woof' on the porch." Meaning there was a "wolf" or more accurately a coyote on the porch. I ran to the screen door looking out and sure enough there was a skinny coyote waiting for his turn at some table scraps. My grandfather went to the door yelling, "Get out! Shoo!" and that coyote ran full speed back out into the dark. Occasionally, neighbors might walk up to the door carrying a cake or a bag of fresh tomatoes just out of the garden, and they would come in to visit as my grandmother put on the coffee, and I settled in to listen to an evening of story-telling.

Sitting there with the door open to the dark, you never knew what might walk up and come through the door.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God
Mother of us all. Amen.

[Jane reads "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" by Wendell
Berry]