

Sermon ✝ April 11, 2021
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When I'm in one of those "reflective" moods, looking back over the many decades of my life, I realize that I've spent over one-third of my life in school . . . kindergarten through senior year in high school, four years of college, four years of seminary as well as post-graduate studies.

And through all of those years in all of those very different classroom situations, there was always one certainty: In every learning situation, there were always one or two people who embraced the responsibility of asking the difficult questions. I'm not talking about your regular, normal, run-of-the-mill questions—"*Will this be on the final exam?*" "*Do we have to know this?*"

I am talking about those embarrassing, awkward, cut-to-the-quick kinds of questions where the lesson grinds to a halt and learning sometimes begins. Only one or two people will dare ask those questions. I do not know why this is so. No one elects this person. This person does not stand up and declare that she or he will now be the "*designated question asker*" for the entire group. But it happens somehow. And others wait upon this person's questions. Silently they wait, hoping that the "*designated question asker*" will articulate publicly the words of the question forming at the back of their mind which they dare not ask themselves.

It is good to have such "*designated question askers*" around because not all of us are comfortable asking questions, *especially* asking questions in church. Is one even permitted to ask questions in church? A friend, who must have been a bright, inquisitive child, remembers being told that all those mysterious questions that popped into her head during Mass were temptations of the devil. The Sunday school teacher smiles condescendingly at the curious child and says, "*We don't have questions here, dear, we have faith.*" Faith means answering questions, not asking them. Faith means shushing the questions. Does this sound familiar?

Certainly, the Bible does not think of faith and questions as opposites. Asking the right question is important.

In the Gospel of John, we even have someone who might be very much the "*patron saint of questioners*". Thomas, the Apostle, is symbolized by a carpenter's square (because tradition tells us he was a carpenter) and spear and arrows (recalling his death). A question mark would have been equally appropriate. John does not tell us much about Thomas, but he says enough to make it clear that in the company of disciples Thomas was the "*designated question asker.*"

When John introduces Thomas in the story, John goes to pains to show that Thomas is completely and without reservation loyal to Jesus and his cause. When Jesus turns to face his destiny and death, Thomas becomes the leader, rallying the disciples, and telling them, "*Let us also go, that we may die with Jesus*". When Thomas next appears, he assumes his role as "*designated question asker.*"

Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for his death and departure. Jesus speaks words which are now enormously familiar to us. Listen, if you can, to how strange these words must have first sounded:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.

We've heard that often enough. It is familiar. We may not have a clue to what Jesus really means, but we're surely not going to be the one to stand up in church and ask about that! Thank heavens for Thomas! He pipes up: *"Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* You can imagine some of the other disciples at the back of the room: *"Man, I'm glad he asked—I sure didn't know what Jesus was talking about!"*

Jesus welcomed Thomas' question, *and then* explained more about his departure and what was happening. The good teacher welcomes questions, treasures questions, can never get enough good, incisive questions. Jesus' disciples called him Rabbi, Teacher.

It is the unprepared teacher who dreads questions, the uncertain teacher who fears questions, the teacher fearful of vulnerability who sees questions as threats. Questions give birth to learning.

At the Jewish Passover feast questions occupy a place of honor. The youngest child at the table becomes the *"designated question asker."*

"Why is this night different from all other nights?"

"On all other nights, we eat either leavened or unleavened bread; why, on this night, only unleavened bread?"

In the middle of the meal . . . in the middle of worship . . . there are questions.

Questions can be troubling in a religious community. As human beings we all ask pretty much the same ultimate questions and, one way or another, we negotiate some peace with them even if we don't exhaustively answer them. Then someone raises a hand in class and stirs up the questions once more, and we have to wrestle with them all over again.

Thomas, the *"designated question asker,"* takes the good news of resurrection seriously, maybe too seriously, with his questions and insistence that he know the truth for himself. Though the others may tell him of their experience, Thomas will wait to see for himself: *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails..."*

Thomas has questions. He will not accept secondhand evidence. He waits to see for himself. *And this is really important . . .* Thomas waits in the midst of the community of those who have already seen one Easter's worth of resurrection. Thomas does not walk away muttering about the silly stories of his comrades. Thomas has his questions. Thomas may even have his doubts, but he has his questions and he has his doubts in the very midst of the community.

A few years ago the Gallup Poll did a survey of "The Unchurched American." *"Unchurched,"* was defined as *"a person who is not a member of a church or synagogue or who has not attended church or synagogue in the last six months, apart from weddings, funerals, or special holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or Yom Kippur."* Of "unchurched Americans," approximately half could imagine circumstances that might lead them to become actively involved in a religious community.

For this half who could imagine becoming a part of a church or synagogue, the survey reported the single greatest factor would be finding "a pastor/rabbi or church/synagogue with whom I can openly discuss my religious doubts." People have questions and people wonder if there is a place where they can explore their questions.

We have Thomas, *"patron saint of questioners,"* in our company of disciples, and it is good that he is here. Thomas' presence reminds us that questions and doubts are by no means hostile to faith. It is through questions and in the very midst of doubts that faith is born.

The way to faith does not evade questions by going around them; it does not escape questions by pretending they do not exist. Faith honors questions because questions are only one more of the many ways we come to God.

In his autobiographical novel, *"Night"*, Elie Wiesel tells of growing up a Jewish boy in a small village in Hungary and of Moshe, the poor man who cleaned the synagogue.

One afternoon the boy saw Moshe at prayer, and asked him, *"Why do you pray?"*

They talked and Moshe told the boy the way of questions: *"... every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer. Man raises himself to God by the questions he asks."*

Then the boy asked him, *"And why do you pray, Moshe?"*

"I pray," said Moshe, *"that God will give me the strength to ask the right questions."*

May we have the strength
... and the wisdom
... and the love to ask God the right questions.

