

Sermon ✝ April 24, 2022
John 20:19-31
Frank Maxwell

In 1981, Garrison Keilor published a collection of his stories entitled *Happy To Be Here*. One of the stories was “Don: The True Story of a Young Person.”

It is the story of a young, 17 year old boy who joins a punk rock band—much to his parents disapproval. As a matter of fact his father is so strong in his disapproval that he tells his son, “*Sometimes you make me ashamed to be your parent.*”

The father decides right off the bat that rock bands are terrible and that nothing good can come of them. The story goes on to tell, in Keilor's folksy style, of the very strained relationship that is created by such feelings. The point being that unfounded criticism is one of the worst forms of doubt. To give up on someone before hearing them out is to say—I don't believe in you at all—you can't do it.

This is how we have often perceived the doubt of Thomas whose story we, once again, hear in the reading of this morning's gospel. We remember Thomas as the one who wouldn't believe unless he saw “*in his hands the print of the nails and placed his own hand in Jesus' wounded side.*”

But maybe there 's something more to the doubting of Thomas—something that we need to consider before passing judgement upon him. Over the years Thomas has suffered from some bad press. All of that doubting business has put a stigma on his character. We tend to overlook his positive points. We forget about Thomas' loyal devotion. In the 11th chapter of John, Jesus proposed to go to Bethany in Judea to raise Lazarus . . .the disciples tried to dissuade Jesus because of the dangers. But it was Thomas who said, “*Let us all go along with the Teacher, so that we may die with him.*”

We forget about Thomas the honest inquirer. He was perhaps the only disciple humble enough to admit that he didn't understand Jesus' talk about death and resurrection. So he asked, “*Lord we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way to get there?*” He didn't understand . . . but he wanted to.

We forget about Thomas the disciple who loved people and wanted fellowship with them. The first 13 chapters of Acts show Thomas time and again in this role. We forget all of Thomas' good traits and remember only what we consider to be bad . . . his doubting. (How human of us). And maybe—just maybe—we cut doubting a bit short.

Doubting is not all bad. We all need to use a bit of cautious optimism as we make our own decisions on a day-to-day basis. It may be that through Thomas' doubting, his faith was greatly strengthened. A doubter so full of love, loyalty, and a seeking spirit has to be God's kind of doubter.

God's kind of doubter struggles for their faith rather than run away. Thomas had plenty of occasions to run away—but he didn't.

Apart from the physical danger there was the inner anguish of not understanding. (At a time like that the last thing in the world we want to rely on is faith) and yet Thomas struggled with his faith. And we've become pretty good at running away. We run away from marriages and jobs often times for the slightest of reasons. We run away from one church to another because we don't like the selection of hymns or the way the priest wears her hair.

Thomas is our good example. He was still in there *in his disbelief* struggling for faith even behind locked doors.

God's kind of doubter also struggles honestly for faith rather than settle for gullibility. Thomas could not deceive himself by confusing faith and knowledge. Many doubts are valid. Some of our childish understandings of God should be discarded. It is important to distinguish fantasy and superstition from true faith.

Thomas taught us to doubt creatively. We can do this by not withdrawing from the community of faith. And by recognizing that doubt may well lead to faith or increased faith.

And remember, Thomas didn't give up . . . for eight days after doubting, Thomas went back to the house with his friends and encountered the risen Lord.

God's kind of doubter struggles for faith rather than settle for hearsay. Thomas had to see for himself . . . first-hand. How much of our own faith has been indirect, hand-me-down, unexplained assumptions and borrowed opinions? To confuse the witness of others for proof is not faith. While the faith of another can certainly serve as an inspiring example—each of us must ultimately come to terms with our own personal faith experience.

Thomas would have eventually made the leap of faith even if the risen Christ had not appeared to him. But whenever it came soon or late—it would be his faith, not a passive reliance on hearsay. He was open to possibility. He did not give up on Jesus. He just needed to see more for himself.

Today Christians can identify with Thomas as never before. We want so desperately to believe, but in an age drunk with the wine of science and self-exaltation, somehow religious faith seems so naive and so infantile.

It is at that point that we need to be a bit like Thomas. He never stopped asking questions. His was a good faith for it was always in the development stage. His faith was a struggle . . . not some syrupy, sugarcoated faith that comes of simple-minded answers to complex questions.

And sure, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*" But seeing alone does not make one a Christian. It is our trust and commitment to Christ that enables us to take his name as our own. And quite often such faith is surely born out of struggle.

So let us, like Thomas . . . be willing to struggle for our faith . . . be willing to have hearts which are grounded in the church's loving relationships . . . *and* be willing to be seekers as long as we live.