

April 11, 2021 | The Second Sunday of Easter  
John 20: 24-29

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON  
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### *Doubters & Deniers*

Are you a doubter? Are you a denier? Have you been both? Do you plan on being either of those things in the future?

I ask those questions, because they reveal a lot about who we are and how we approach the world. And how the world receives us. If you find yourself drawn to the denial corner, you're in great company, with the disciple Peter. Despite his earlier denial of even knowing Christ, Jesus gives him the keys to the Kin-dom of Heaven.<sup>1</sup> Our Catholic friends recognize him as the first Pope. No matter how we refer to Peter, he is **never**, Peter, the denier.

If you found yourself drawn to the doubter corner, and if you heard the Scripture reading, then you might know where this is going. If you're a doubter, you're in company with the disciple Thomas.

Rarely, if ever, do we refer to Thomas the Apostle, as such. More commonly, he is "Doubting Thomas." Thomas, *the one who didn't believe that Christ had risen*<sup>2</sup>. Thomas, *the one who needed to touch the wounds of crucifixion*<sup>3</sup>. "Doubting Thomas" is such a common refrain that you might imagine that he was **always** doubting Christ. But that's not true. In fact, the only account of Thomas' doubt is found in the Gospel of John.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the author of *Americanah* and *We Should All be Feminists*, warned of the "danger of telling a single story." In a TED talk she delivered more than a decade ago, she said that "the consequence of telling a single story... is that it robs people of dignity... it emphasizes how we are different, rather than how we are similar." As an example, where John singles Thomas out, the other Gospels are quite clear in saying that many, perhaps *all* of the disciples doubted Christ's return.

This is particularly true when the news of his resurrection is first shared by women, Mary Magdalene and Mary Salome among them. Moreover, the focus on Thomas' brief moment of doubt, clouds the rest of his life. The early church suggests that Thomas became a missionary, traveling throughout modern day Iran, and even India. In fact, the Modern Syrian Christians of Kerala, India, believe that Thomas traveled to their state and established churches with their

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:19 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> John 20:25 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> John 20:27 (NRSV)

ancestors.<sup>4</sup> Still today, 2,000 years later, one of the most common names among that group of believers is “Thomas.” In another story, we learn that when Jesus prepared to travel to raise Lazarus from the dead, it was Thomas who suggested that the disciples accompany him, precisely because he feared for Christ's life and did not want him to die alone. So, if Thomas did these other things, why have we made his doubt permanent?

It's permanent, because we, as human beings, view doubt as a bad thing. We have built entire systems of technology around the human need to erase doubt, and assure ourselves of certainty. There are three phrases, I could say right now, that I imagine would trigger a device in many of your homes: Hey, Siri; Ok, Google; Alexa. Some of you might have just heard the helpful voice on the other end respond with a polite, “How can I help you?” And, even if that wasn't the response, we know that those devices silently stand ready to answer any and all of our queries. “What temperature should I roast broccoli at; how long until the next train gets here; what's the weather like tomorrow?”

We live in a world that demands that we appear certain-- that we know what's coming next, and so we demand the same from the environment around us. How often do you really hear someone say “I don't know,” or “I'm not familiar with that?” Unfortunately, it isn't that common. We expect assertions, and, should we be wrong in any of those assertions-- no big deal-- the easy out is to simply “deny, deny, deny.” We're cool with denial, not so much with doubt.

But why? Why is it that we are so afraid of expressing apprehension? Why do we so consistently choose to “Fake it, till we make it,” when deep down we know that we'd get a lot further, if we simply said “I don't know,” or, “help me understand?”

Uncertainty activates our most primal behavioral responses. As humans, we have developed an incredibly complex system through which to respond to different stimuli. In many cases, when we encounter uncertainty, our brain tells us to avert the course.<sup>5</sup> Emergency exit signs light up in our brain, and before we know it, we're turning towards what we think is safety.

But, because we know that this is what happens, what if we were instead intentional about naming uncertainty and doubt when we felt it? What if we dared to be vulnerable, and simply said “I need to see, so that I can better understand.” I think of the comment a friend raised in our last Lenten reflection conversation during Jazz Coffeehouse. I'm paraphrasing, but she said this “I see passion, and I see death. But sometimes I struggle to see resurrection in our midst, and so I have to ask: does our faith work?” I have returned to that question every day since. I have faith that this faith does work, but each day I find myself pausing to point out where and how that is true. Each day I allow myself a little space to doubt.

So, what if we were more like Thomas the disciple? His doubt wasn't because he lacked faith, rather it was this faith that assured him of the space to doubt. And it was Jesus himself who

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<sup>4</sup> The Surprisingly Early History of Christianity in India, *Smithsonian Mag*

<sup>5</sup> Carleton, R. Nicholas, *Fear of the unknown: One fear to rule them all?* (2016) p.12

heard what Thomas needed to see, and met him where he was. Immediately after that meeting, Thomas exclaims “my Lord and my God!”<sup>6</sup>

Thomas found certainty through the embrace of his doubt; through his vulnerability; through his asking for evidence. Going forward, might we all learn from that example. Might we have enough faith to allow space for doubt.

And, going forward, when we think of Thomas, might we think of all of his stories. Thomas was a doubter, yes, but he was also Thomas, *the one who encouraged the disciples to travel with Jesus, so that he would not die alone*,<sup>7</sup> Thomas, *the fiercely and undyingly loyal*; Thomas, *the Patron Saint of India*; **Thomas the Apostle**, *the one whose faith was made stronger because he allowed room for doubt, and asked to touch and see.*

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John 20:28 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> John 11:16 (NRSV)