

4-12-26 sermon

John 20.19-31; Psalm 16

Before I go any further, I want to say something about English translations of the Gospel of John. If you've been following along in a pew bible, or in your own bible in recent weeks, you'll have noticed that whenever the word "Jew" appears I read, "Judaean." The Greek word is *'Ioudaioi*, literally, "Judaean." For John, this is not simply an ethnic word, meaning, "Jew," it is more a *geographic* term, describing someone from *Judea*. This is important, because John distinguishes between Galilee and Judea, and the response of people to Jesus from the two regions that comprise Israel. *'Ioudaioi* becomes shorthand for the leadership of Israel, who live in the south, in Jerusalem, in Judea. So, when John says the disciples are hiding, "for fear of the Judaeans," he means, "for fear of the same people who just killed Jesus." The leadership of Israel. He does *not* mean the Jewish people as a whole. The disciples are Jews themselves after all! So, given that John's Gospel has been used for *centuries* to fuel antisemitism – "the Jews killed Jesus" – it is utterly baffling, and frustrating to me that most English translators continue to choose to use the word "Jew," and not the literal – and more accurate – translation, "Judaean." When every translation is already an *interpretation*, to continue to use "Jew" is a harmful practice which needs to end. Alright, on to the sermon.

A couple of years ago I attended the Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin University. I spent quite a bit of time in the exhibitions hall as both my publishers had booths, and so it was a good opportunity to catch up with friends I hadn't seen for a while. I also stopped by the booths of the magazines to which I subscribe, one of which is the *Christian Century*. I met one of their editors, Jon Mathieu, and he asked me if I'd have any interest in writing for the Century. I said I'd love to, especially for the "In the Lectionary" section. He said he'd pass on my information to that editor. I thanked him and then promptly forgot about that conversation. Until I got an email in the fall of 2024 to see if I still had any interest in writing. I wrote back and said, "Absolutely," then joked to Rebecca, "As long as they don't assign me Christmas or Easter or anything from the Gospel of John, I'll be fine." So – and you know where this is going already – they wrote back and said, "Great. We'd like you to write the entries for Easter Sunday and the Second Sunday of Easter in 2025 and it's the Gospel of John." Of course. All this to say, my sermon this morning is a riff on one of those entries. So, if you read the *Christian Century*, some of this may sound very familiar!

I knew exactly who "doubting Thomas" was from an early age. Growing up in a fundamentalist, dispensationalist church, Thomas provided an oft-told cautionary tale. While I'm fairly certain the elders of my church could not have named the seven deadly sins, if I'd *asked* them to, I suspect "doubt" would have been among them. For – if not *deadly* – doubt was certainly *dangerous*. If bumper stickers had been available when I was growing up, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" would have been the go-to choice for our congregation.

Every Sunday we were exhorted to “have faith,” to “just believe,” and to be wary should doubts arise, for doubt was the opposite of faith. I left that church when I came to the United States 35 years ago. I was already leaving their *theology* long before I boarded the plane. In time, I would come to believe that the opposite of faith is not, in fact, *doubt*.

It is *certainty*.

A friend introduced me to the writings of Frederick Buechner, and when I read, in his book, *Wishful Thinking*, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving,” any residual guilt I still felt for questioning the version of the Christian faith I grew up with drifted away. For the certainty that I was told revealed a strong faith – and strong people – had come to feel fragile, unhelpful, as it had little to offer the pain and suffering I witnessed in others. The perennial problem of evil is not solved by doubling down on belief. At least it isn’t for me, and that version of faith wreaks all kinds of harm in peoples’ lives. Usually in conversations that feature this kind of statement,

“If you had more faith, than that wouldn’t have happened.”

Let me be clear: to say that is spiritual malpractice at best, spiritual abuse at worst. If you’ve been on the receiving end of that kind of statement at some painful point in your life, then I am truly sorry. I don’t care how well-meaning that person may have been, whatever your pain was, it was *not* caused by any lack of faith.

Over the years I’ve had multiple conversations with strangers, who, upon learning what I do for a living, respond, “Oh, I don’t believe in God.” My younger self would have leapt at this chance to engage in some apologetics. Ready to leap in and defend the faith. To defend God – who surely doesn’t need me to do that on their behalf. But, the arrogance of youth. The arrogance of immature faith. My older self usually responds, “Tell me about this God you don’t believe in, because I probably don’t believe in that God either.” If the conversation continues, I might discover that the person grew up in a church similar to mine, and at some point rejected the certainty of that faith, and the judgmentalism and self-righteousness that often accompanies it. Or I might learn that they’ve been on the receiving end of such judgment and want nothing to do with the God in whose name the person pronounced that judgment. If the conversation ventures into vulnerable territory, I’ll hear stories of profound wounding at the hands of individuals and institutions. I’ll hear that someone they loved and respected in their church had let them down in ways they couldn’t believe possible. And – sometimes – that *they* had been the one to do the letting down, and had lost faith, not in God, but *in themselves*.

So, I wonder... if we’d had the chance to sit down with Thomas before he returned to the house where the disciples were gathered behind locked doors for fear of the Judaeans, which one of those stories might Thomas tell?

Why *wasn’t* he with the others in that first day? Where had he been? Why did he eventually return? Why did he say he would need to thrust his hand into Jesus’ side before he would believe their declaration that, “We have seen the Lord!” What was the source of his doubt?

Perhaps he had lost faith in Jesus. How could he possibly be the One he said he was, and then allow himself to be killed? “No, they must have seen a ghost. They just want to believe that Jesus isn’t gone.”

Perhaps Thomas had lost faith in himself. After all, he had once declared that he was willing to return to Judaea with Jesus and die with him at the hands of his enemies there. But just a few days ago he had *abandoned* Jesus when the Council made good on their threat. I’m sure Thomas was in earnest when he made that declaration earlier. But when it all went down – as Jesus had said it would – he ran, just like the others. Maybe it was some combination of losing faith in Jesus *and* in himself. Who knows. What we do know is that, whatever the reason for his questioning of his friends’ experience, he is remembered as “doubting Thomas,” which feels quite unfair. Sure, Jesus singles him out, and says, “Do not doubt, but believe.” For a long time I could only hear those words as Jesus’ *criticism* of Thomas, rather than the *invitation* I have come to believe they were. Jesus is “the Word made flesh,” and sometimes we need the reassurance of flesh. How often – when we haven’t seen someone in a long time and then when they’re there, we reach out to touch their face, say, “Is it really you?” So, I understand some of Thomas’s hesitation to trust the testimony of his friends. He’d put all his hope, perhaps all his love, in this man.

And he had been killed.

I’m sure Thomas was as devastated as the rest of them. Could he risk opening himself up to the hope that Jesus was *not* dead. That he had, indeed, been raised from the dead? Restored to them? Apparently not. So, yes, I think it’s unfair that we continue to call him “doubting Thomas.” Not just because one inglorious moment should not outweigh all the other moments of a person’s life. In the same way that the worst thing we’ve done is not the sum of our life, no matter how much people may try to make it so. But also, because Thomas’ encounter with the risen Jesus brings John’s Gospel full circle. For, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” It is *Thomas* who makes the declaration we have been waiting *the entire length of the book* to hear someone make:

“My Lord, *and my God!*”

John tells us that he has written these words that we, too, may come to believe. And it is this dialogue between Thomas and Jesus that concludes the Gospel. Sure – there’s another chapter after this one, but it feels like an epilogue. An afterword. Mostly about the restoration of Peter, who had also failed Jesus.

But this sounds like the end of a book, right:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Like Thomas, our own doubts might just be a natural and essential part of that journey. Thomas shows us we can tell the truth about our doubts. *Own* them, not pretend like we don't have questions. Real questions. *Important* questions. I think Frederick Buechner is right:

“Doubts *are* the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

And certainty is *not* faith. Faith includes acknowledging our doubts. Not as a *threat* to our faith. Not as a *problem* for our faith. But as a way to grow *in* our faith. Because if there's no room for doubt, there's no room for me. And on the other side of those doubts, there is belief. It's just different. More mature. More spacious.

Thomas came back to the community. He told the truth about his doubt. Made himself vulnerable. May we do the same, and in so doing, find our own faith deepening and maturing. So that *we* may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name.”

Amen.