**“Believe It or Not!”**

**John 20:19-31**

**April 19, 2020 - 2nd Sunday of Easter**

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**John 20:19-31**

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘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.’

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 27Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ 28Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ 29Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The “Fiji mermaid”...a tall tale or fish tale.

The “Chinese Shrunken Head”… the size of a lemon.

“Wadlow the Giant” at 8 feet 11 inches tall, *the human high-rise*.

All of these and thousands of other people and items have been included in editions of Ripley’s Believe It or Not! over the years.

Robert L. Ripley was born on Christmas Day, 1893 in Santa Rosa, California. He began his newspaper career as a sports cartoonist at the age of 16. As a reporter of the odd and unusual, Ripley traveled to the farthest corners of the globe, visiting over 200 countries, meeting with kings and queens, cannibal chieftains, tribesmen and natives along the way. His extensive travels earned him the title "The Modern-Day Marco Polo."

Do you think *Ripley's Believe It or Not* is passé' today? Ripley’s Believe It or Not series were popular around the world beginning in 1928, first as a cartoon series, then a radio series, and finally television syndication. Today there are active museums around the world: 21 here in the United States, 3 in Canada, and in 8 other countries throughout the world.

Ripley’s Believe or Not can border on the sensational and tawdry. But who wouldn't want to read Ripley’s Believe It or Not? It’s a chance for one’s world to be expanded and challenged. With every picture the reader is challenged to make a faith decision…do I believe this or not? Some believe it all…no doubting Thomases among them.

“Thomas, would you believe…Jesus has risen?”

“Would you believe…that Jesus who was crucified between two thieves is alive?”

“Would you believe that he has appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other women and to all of us?

Thomas' response is an emphatic:

"No, I don’t believe such a ridiculous story!"

Thomas is the incredulous nonbeliever who hides inside every Christian…

the questioner in us that resists easy answers to hard questions of faith, who always wants a little more proof.

I think the time has come to rehabilitate the reputation of Thomas. Thomas has had to walk the corridors of history known as *Doubting Thomas*. Do you know there is a Doubting Thomas Anonymous website and there was a rock band named Doubting Thomas in the late 80s/early 90s?

The Sunday evening after the resurrection, the gang was all there )except for Judas and Thomas) meeting in a house behind locked doors, cowering in "fear of the Jews" (v.19). They must have been a disheartened and fearful lot, not living boldly and empowered by the new reality that Jesus has risen from the dead. However, their mood changes when Jesus appears among them.

Jesus' first words to them were the standard Jewish greeting (Judges 6:23, Daniel 10:12), “Peace be with you.” He then showed them his hands and his side. It is then that the disciples believed. (v.20)

Jesus repeats his greeting and in effect, appoints them as apostles by saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v.21). He then "breathed on them" and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"(v.23).

A week later when the disciples were gathered behind closed doors in the same house, Jesus appeared to them again. After greeting them, Jesus addresses Thomas specifically and invites him to put his "finger here and see my hands" (v.27).

Thomas…without touching Jesus…responds, "My Lord and my God" (v.28).

It doesn’t matter that Thomas was no better and no worse than the other disciples who didn’t believe either, until they saw Jesus.

It doesn’t matter that tradition has Thomas carrying the gospel to India, where there still exists an order known as Christians of St. Thomas of India.

Nor does it seem to matter that this same tradition has Thomas suffering martyrdom for the faith. No. He will always be "Doubting Thomas."

Thomas has gotten a bad deal.

Today's gospel lesson from John is not the only place in Scripture where Thomas is seen in action. Do you even know about the other places Thomas is mentioned in the gospels? Has the moniker worn by Thomas as a "doubter" color our perception of Thomas? Can Thomas teach us anything about what it means to believe?  
  
In his gospel, John begins to flesh out the personality of Thomas in an incident surrounding the death of Lazarus in John 11.

Jesus tells the disciples that the time has come for them to go to Bethany to comfort Lazarus’ grieving family, but the disciples can hardly believe what they are hearing. Given the hostile attitude of some in Jerusalem toward Jesus *and* the proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem, for them, to go to Bethany at a time like this was nothing short of putting one’s head into the mouth of an angry lion.

It is Thomas who speaks up and, addresses his fellow disciples:

"Let us also go, that we may die with him."

To make such a statement, to take such a stand, requires no insignificant amount of courage and devotion. Here was one who was willing to lay down his own life in a spirit of solidarity with Jesus.

Why don’t we remember Thomas as *Courageous Thomas* rather than *Doubting Thomas?*  
Is the courage of Thomas and his willingness to die diminished because of his later caution surrounding what he perceived as hysterical reports of Jesus' resurrection? Why should one event define the life of Thomas any more than another? This first glimpse of Thomas should remind us that there is more to a person than a convenient *sound bite* of one experience.

The next time we hear about Thomas is in John 14. Jesus is speaking and begins with: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places… And ends with:

And you know the way to the place where I am going.’

Thomas admits that he, for one, doesn't have a *clue* about what Jesus is talking about. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas’ response leads Jesus to speak one of the most memorable passages in the New Testament: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"(v.6).   
  
It took remarkable honesty for Thomas to acknowledge that, for him, Jesus was not making any sense. Why don't we call him "Honest Thomas" instead of "Doubting Thomas"? Because of Thomas’ honest confession, *"Lord, we do not know”*, we are the recipients of hope-filled words that have sustained people for over 2,000 years in moments of loss and separation and grief.

The third scene in which Thomas plays a significant role is found in today's gospel text.

Thomas isn't the only person defined by a single experience in history. Consider:

\*Richard Nixon is remembered more for the Watergate break-in than for the

normalization of relations with China.

\* George Armstrong Custer is known more for his defeat at Little Big Horn

than for being the youngest general in the union Army.

Definition by a single experience can work in the reverse also…

\*Babe Ruth is known as the *Home Run King* even though he holds the

distinction of being the *Strike-out King* also.

Do not miss the significance of this. The other disciples doubted just as Thomas doubted, and just as we would if we had been in their place.

All of this leads to a more interesting question: *Why has the Christian community developed such a negative attitude toward doubt?*

Some have been reared in a religious environment in which doubt is considered the antithesis of faith. This story of Thomas is often used to reinforce that lesson.

But isn't the "doubt vs. faith" dichotomy a false issue? Is not the opposite of faith unbelief rather than doubt?

I think that doubt has a constructive and positive role to play as we exercise our faith muscles and deal with unresolved questions of faith.

Sometimes in the church dismiss or discount doubts and questions as the products of an immature faith. The same religious platitudes are repeated that were found to be unsatisfying during struggles of faith. Sometimes in our conviction that we possess *some* of the answers, we act as though we have *all* the answers. The three least used words in our religious vocabulary might very well be, "I don't know."

Could we not, however, respond more positively to these questionings and doubts? Here is where Thomas’ story can help us.

We can learn from Thomas that even though we don't know where our journey may lead, it is enough that our Lord makes the journey with us. And in those times when our faith needs the reinforcement of tangible reality, it is good to know that our Lord does not meet our doubts by chastising us, but with grace and love.

Our congregations are filled with people who hold unresolved issues of faith and belief,

but there is often no safety zone within churches where these doubts can be raised and legitimized without the questioner being made to feel like a second-class Christian.

Instead we hold before them the negative image of *Thomas the Doubter*.

The Easter miracle of this scripture passage is that Jesus comes again and again to those scared and confused disciples. Thomas is given exactly what he has requested; also - a chance to see and touch Jesus for himself.

It is important that the story does not tell us that Thomas did touch Jesus, because Thomas touching Jesus isn’t the point. The point is Jesus’ offer of himself…over and over again…to people who long to see him. With no questions asked, Jesus offers himself and gives the repeated gift of his presence and his peace.

So what if we rehabilitate the reputation of Thomas to one who had the courage to admit his lack of understanding and in doing so acknowledge that we too have doubts? And what if we celebrated the willingness of Thomas to express his honest doubts?   
  
Believe it or not…we could help persons to see that faith is a belief held in the presence of doubts rather than a belief that removes all doubt?

Believe it or not…we might discover persons empowered to openly discuss their doubts in their individual struggles of faith and also be encouraged with our own struggles of faith.

Believe it or not…we might be seen by unbelievers, not as folks who have all the answers, but as persons, like them, who hold a measure of faith despite our uncertainties.   
  
Believe it or not…we might give the church a more human face.

Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote:

Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God,

if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.

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

- Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, 20.

When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that just as Jesus did with the disciples, Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe.