

“Risen Indeed! Even though you doubt...”

I am glad to be back with you this week as we continue our time in the series “Risen Indeed!”

We are looking at the scriptures that tell us of Christ’s appearances
after he rose from the grave.

Those times when he showed up to his disciples and others,
so that they would tell of his resurrection,
so that they would share the very good news
of what they had experienced with him.

This is, in many ways, the basis of our faith.

We talk about the Empty Tomb - for good reason,
the empty tomb is a beautiful thing.

But it is beautiful because it wasn’t just empty.

It wasn’t just that Jesus’ body wasn’t there.

It’s that he is risen.

That he is alive.

He didn’t just disappear -

he conquered death, he came back to life,

he met with, walked with, ate with, talked with

his disciples in several different incidents.

And that is powerful enough that two thousand years later,

we are still celebrating it,

talking about it,

sharing it with others,

gathering together to marvel over the miracle.

So today we turn to our second encounter with the Risen Christ.

John tells us,

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not
with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We
have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my
finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe
it.”

Two Thousand years later, we still call him doubting Thomas.

Which I don’t think is entirely fair.

He wasn’t obstinate about his doubt.

He was only asking for what the other disciples had already had.

He hadn’t been there when Jesus came.

He didn’t get to experience what they had already experienced.

He was asking for an encounter with Jesus.

To see Him face-to-face like his friends had.

To see the evidence of all that they had witnessed -
the wounds in his hands and and his side.

To hear his familiar voice, and to see his expressions.

We call him doubting Thomas as if he did something wrong,
by wanting to see for himself.

No one wants to be defined by their worst moment, by their weakness.

We all have bad moments.

We all have weaknesses.

We all have words, and actions and thoughts
that we wish we could take back.

When I was a kid, I could throw a tantrum like nobody's business.

My Mom could easily attest to that reality.

she can testify to the fact that I could scream.

If nothing else, I had healthy, healthy lungs.

What if my family members went around these days calling me 'screamy Rebekah.'

Because of how loudly I screamed as an infant and as a child having a tantrum?

Maybe you're forgetful or clumsy or a terrible driver.

Maybe you fail at something regularly,

what if that became the add on to your name.

"Greedy Phillip" or "Clumsy Erin" or "Oblivious Tom."

Wouldn't that just be awful?

And yet we call him doubting Thomas.

Simply because he had trouble believing that someone rose from the dead.

Do you know what the mortality rate of the human race is?

It hovers around a hundred percent.

The empty tomb, the Risen Christ is unprecedented.

It's bewildering.

It confounds people.

It confounds the men when Mary tells them she has seen the Risen Lord.

They had to go and try to see for themselves.

It confounds thinkers today.

There are all kinds of theories around what REALLY

happened to cause the tomb to be empty

Some say the body was stolen by the disciples,

so that they could spread this unbelievable story

that Jesus was alive.

And yet we somehow are surprised that Thomas had a bit of a difficult time believing it?
That amazes me - makes me shake my head.

I suspect we condescend poor Thomas because we're afraid of doubt.
We have this crazy idea that one either believes or doubts.
That these two are polar opposites.
That you cannot hold them in tension with each other.

Which IS crazy, because we know what the Scripture says:
Lord I believe, only help my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

For I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Romans 7:19)

In the words of the Psalmist we -
Lord, how long will you turn your face from me,
how long will my enemies be exulted over me,
Oh but I trust your steadfast love
and you have dealt bountifully with me (Psalm 13, paraphrased)

People are complex.
We are able to hold in tension our joy and our sorrow,
our hope and our despair, our love and our hate...
and yes, our belief and our doubt.

A number of years ago John Ortberg
came out with a book called Faith and Doubt.
And I wasn't sure I wanted to read it at first -
in fact, I listened to it as an audio book in my car.
But I wasn't sure I wanted to get into it
because I somehow had this feeling
that if I thought about doubt,
if I learned about it and examined it
and spent some time on it,
all there would be in my life
was doubt.

Like somehow the thinking about doubt would push the faith right out of me.
As if there were only room for one of the two inside of me.

Well, eventually I decided to give it a go - John Ortberg is one of my favourite writers,
and I'd already listened to or read everything else by him.

So I decided to just let myself listen to the first chapter,
I could stop listening anytime, after all.
If I was worried my faith was in real jeopardy.

So I began to listen.
And I discovered that thinking about doubt,
allowing doubt to be named and considered and thought about,

didn't push the faith out of me.

In fact, in some ways it really strengthened my faith, made my faith more real.
Because I wasn't afraid of doubt anymore.
I wasn't avoiding it.
I wasn't hiding from it.

I believe that people are complex.
Complex enough that we can fully believe,
we can love Jesus passionately,
we can devote our lives to following him,
and still struggle with doubt.
As the scripture says:
Lord, I believe...only help my unbelief.

So no, it is not surprising that Thomas might have had some doubt.
And I think we do him a disservice to define him by that moment.

Because the story continues in this way:

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Notice it doesn't say "Thomas put his fingers in Jesus' wounds..."
I suspect Thomas didn't need to do what he'd claimed
he'd HAVE to do in order to believe.
I suspect that just being there was enough.
I suspect the moment Jesus appeared
everything changed for Thomas.

But what I love is that Jesus greets them,
and then immediately gives Thomas
the opportunity he has said he needs.
"Put your finger here, see my hands.
Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

Jesus doesn't mock him, or debate with him, or do any thing else.
He knows Thomas' need and he meets it.
Whether or not Thomas actually did put his hand in the wounds,
Jesus was there, ready to take it.

I imagine Thomas' voice shaking as he replies.

The thing about an encounter with the Risen Christ,
is His presence sweeps all the doubts, all the questions off the table.
Just gone.

Standing in the presence of Jesus,
Thomas declares "My Lord and my God."

And yes, Jesus says,

"Because you have seen me, you have believed;
blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Because Jesus was never one to mince words.

He was never one to stop teaching.

He wants Thomas to know that there will be those
who believe without having the privilege that Thomas has just had.

But here's the thing - Thomas is still one of the 12.

He still goes out to share the gospel with the world.

It is believed that he went to India and founded
what are today known as the "Saint Thomas Christians."

He goes to places that he couldn't have imagined to share Jesus with other people.

And though they have not seen, they do believe.

And the Kingdom grows.

Jesus doesn't turn Thomas away, or banish him,

or insist that others be the ones to bring the good news..

I think we need to remember that there is room in faith for doubt.

That we are pilgrims on a journey and companions on the road,

but that doesn't mean we are all at the same place in our faith journey.

My struggle isn't the same as your struggle.

And to be a disciple of Jesus,

I have to have room for your struggle, for your doubt,
for your weakness, for your worst moment.

And you need to have room for my struggle, my doubt, my weakness, my worst moment.

Because Jesus has room for the struggles of us all.

Jesus has room for doubt, and for need,

even for the bold putting of a hand into a wound.

He invites it - if that's what it takes.

It's as though Jesus is saying:

*Be my disciples, be my friends, be my followers,
even though you doubt.*

*Your doubt, it not going to turn me away.
I will meet you there, I will show up and answer your doubt.*

*Put your hand in my hand,
join the rest of my friends on this journey,
and lets go face the world together.*

Let us pray.