

**DOUBTERS WELCOME !**

There have been MANY times in my life, but **1** in particular, back in seminary, when it seemed like *DOUBTING THOMAS* was my SOULMATE. My friends and teachers in seminary just ALWAYS seemed so SURE about their faith, and I just felt so UNCERTAIN. Moreover, they would say that the Risen Christ kept APPEARING to them in the RICH stories of scripture and Christian tradition. But like Thomas, I never seemed to BE there when the Risen Christ APPEARED. I remember talking with my SUPERVISOR at the *Connecticut Mental Health Center*, the CHAPLAIN there. I met with him weekly for an hour of supervision, during which I usually ARGUED with myself over my FAITH, or LACK of it. And one day, I told him that *Doubting Thomas* was like my SOULMATE, and he said: *MAYBE if you look really HARD at Thomas, you can LEARN from him.* I said: *What do you mean?* He said: *I'm not going to TELL you. You have to discover it for YOURSELF. But, I WILL give you a HINT,* he said. *Ask yourself WHY Thomas WASN'T present.*

So THAT'S where I began. I began by wondering WHY Thomas wasn't WITH the others when the RISEN Christ APPEARED to them. And I thought: *Well, maybe he ventured out to buy GROCERIES and SUPPLIES. They HAD to EAT!* And then, suddenly it DAWNED on me: the disciples were **HIDING** in that locked room. They were AFRAID that THOSE who had put JESUS on the cross would NOW come for THEM! And Thomas, the guy we USUALLY think of as a **2<sup>nd</sup> Class** disciple because of his DOUBTING, was the *ONLY* one with the COURAGE to be ABSENT from that locked room. Now, maybe it WAS just to buy groceries. Or MAYBE it was to get a BEAD on the INTENSITY of the opposition, and whether there WERE people out SEARCHING for the disciples. But it doesn't really matter WHY he wasn't there. The FACT is that THOMAS had the COURAGE to be OUT in the streets when the others were locked in a ROOM! And suddenly, my IMAGE of Thomas CHANGED. And I REALIZED that the OTHERS were LOCKED in that room because of THEIR **DOUBTS**. Even though they had WALKED with Jesus and TALKED with Jesus on a DAILY basis, when *CRUNCH time* came, they HID themselves behind locked and bolted doors! FEAR and DOUBT got the BEST of them! So, THEY were NO different than WE are.

A colleague of mine, Martin Copenhaver, is CLEAR in his writings to depict the early disciples as WRACKED with DOUBT, just as ANY congregation of people TODAY who are seeking CHRIST'S way and GOD'S purposes are BOUND to be afflicted with DOUBT. Now, we TRY to STIFLE our doubts, or at least IGNORE them. But let's FACE it: we all have SOME degree of doubt. For SOME, there's that NAGGING thought that maybe the gospels are just FICTION, that maybe somebody made it all UP! Have you ever WONDERED if your faith is really just SUPERSTITION? OR, have you ever wondered why a LOVING God would permit so much SUFFERING in this world? Have you ever asked yourself if maybe YOU'RE a Christian only because your PARENTS were Christians, and YOU just never bothered to QUESTION it? You know: I think we're often AFRAID to struggle with DOUBT because we FEAR that if we ALLOW ourselves to DOUBT, we may fall into that dark night of UNBELIEF that sometimes PLAGUES people. Well, I'M not really WORRIED about that, because I agree with Alfred Lord Tennyson, who wrote: *There lives more FAITH in honest DOUBT, believe me, than in HALF the creeds.* And friends, in nearly 32 years of ministry, I've seen that to be SO true SO often. Give me an honest, open, SEARCHING doubter ANY day!

And let's not forget that some of our greatest LEADERS in the early Christian church had DOUBTS. You CANNOT convince me, for example, that when Jesus invited PETER to get OUT of that boat and walk across that stormy SEA, that Peter didn't have LOTS of doubt. And AS his doubts get stronger, what happens to Peter? He SINKS! And don't WE feel the same WAY when OUR doubts start to take over? THAT'S why we try so hard to push them BACK. BUT, Jesus is THERE for him. AND, some would even say that JESUS had DOUBTS. When Jesus was PRAYING in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed: *Father, IF it is possible, LET this cup PASS from me.* In other words, I'm not so SURE about my MISSION anymore. THAT kind of sounds like a DOUBTING man, doesn't it? Yes, we ALL have DOUBTS. It's NORMAL!

Frederick Buechner, the great theologian, says: *If you DON'T have DOUBTS, you're either KIDDING yourself, or you're ASLEEP.* HOWEVER, Frederick Buechner ALSO calls doubts *the ANTS in the PANTS* of

*FAITH*. In other words, DOUBTS are what KEEP faith ALIVE, and GROWING. SOME would even say that DOUBTS are a primary INGREDIENT in faith, that we NEED doubt in order to GROW in faith.

Well, I think that THOMAS can HELP us in that struggle. I think that Thomas can TEACH us how to DEAL with doubt. FIRST, he TEACHES us by the very fact that he ISN'T present when the Risen Christ appears to His disciples. My POINT is that IF Thomas had BEEN there, HE would have received the SAME revelation as the others. The Risen Christ would have appeared to HIM as well, and SHOWED him His wounds. SO, being in COMMUNITY with OTHER disciples helps us DEAL with our DOUBT, because Christ is PRESENT there. But how OFTEN, when DOUBT creeps IN, do we SEPARATE ourselves from the church? I hear it ALL the time: *Oh, I COULDN'T come to church. I was going through a period of DOUBT.* Or: *my FAITH wasn't very STRONG, so I DIDN'T feel like I could come to church.* Well friends, SEPARATING ourselves from the community of faith is the WORST thing that we can do when DOUBT creeps in! WHY? Because Jesus said: *Wherever 2 or 3 or MORE gather in MY name, there am I also.* So, if we CAN'T find Him **HERE** in church -- where we gather in HIS name day after day, and week after week -- where **CAN** we find Him? Why WOULDN'T we struggle with our DOUBTS here at church? We have a man in this church who told me that he struggles very DEEPLY with doubt, but I'll tell you: I RESPECT him immensely, because he's **HERE** all the time, and VERY active, and CONSTANTLY praying for HELP with his DOUBT. Friends, when DOUBT creeps in, DON'T back AWAY from the church; move TOWARD it!

Thomas can ALSO teach us by his HONESTY. He does NOT just go ALONG with the rest of the disciples. He REFUSES to say that he BELIEVES what he does NOT believe. And he speaks BOLDLY, saying: *Unless I SEE the marks of the NAILS in His hands, and put my FINGER in the marks of the nails, and my HAND in His SIDE, I will NOT believe.* And friends, LIKE Thomas, WE need to be just AS honest about our DOUBTS as we are about our FAITH. Every once-in-a-while, a Confirmation Class kid will REFUSE to be confirmed, because he or she is just not SURE what he or she BELIEVES. And I can RESPECT that, and AFFIRM that, as LONG as that kid doesn't just give UP on the church AFTER Confirmation Class is over, but keeps COMING to church and keeps WORKING on it. Yes, we NEED to be able to be HONEST in church -- about our FAITH **AND** about our DOUBTS. We NEED to be able to say, *I REALLY have a PROBLEM with BELIEVING this or that.* For the WAY to faith is most OFTEN through HONEST doubt and struggle. My OWN faith journey TESTIFIES to that fact. As William Barclay said, *The CURE for DOUBT is NOT to push a thing into the back of the mind and refuse to think about it. The cure for DOUBT is to think a way THROUGH the doubt. We would have a FAITH that would be more SECURE if we did NOT turn back from THINKING too SOON.* And Barclay is RIGHT about that. So, we NEED to keep WORKING on it.

And finally, we can learn from the ENTHUSIASM of Thomas when he DOES find faith. ONCE Thomas sees the RISEN Christ, WHAT does he DO? He exclaims: *My LORD and my GOD!* You see: Thomas is NOT a *LUKEWARM* Christian! ONCE he is CONVINCED, he is MORE than willing to take the LEAD, and to stand UP for his beliefs! In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Portuguese ships reaching MALABAR, on the West Coast of INDIA, were absolutely **DUMBFOUNDED** to find an EXTENSIVE network of Christian churches already EXISTING there. Moreover, these churches claimed to have been founded back in the very FIRST century by NONE other than the Apostle **Thomas**. And ARCHAEOLOGICAL evidence, as well as EARLY church documents lend CREDENCE their claim. So, IMAGINE having the **FAITH** to carry the gospel THAT far from home and to PREACH it to people who had NEVER heard of Jesus Christ before? Yes, WHAT **faith** Thomas MUST have HAD! And LATER, of course, Thomas would **DIE** as a MARTYR for his **FAITH**. SO, we need to LEARN from his ENTHUSIASM when he DOES find faith.

Friends, if YOU'RE struggling with doubt, I would URGE you to KEEP coming to church and struggle **HERE**. And DON'T just go along with the crowd. Think for YOURSELF! But **PLEASE, OPEN** your heart and mind while you ARE here, because -- TRUST me -- the Risen CHRIST is here as well. His Spirit is ALIVE and WELL here! And WHEN you DO see Him, BE like Thomas! EMBRACE the faith, and be ENTHUSIASMIC about it! On the OTHER hand, if you DON'T see Him, don't forget His WORDS to Thomas: *Blessed are those who believe WITHOUT seeing, Thomas.* And then, JOIN us in REACHING out TOGETHER to bear witness to our FAITH that Christ IS risen, that Christ IS alive, and that Christ IS present among us! Yes, just remember: *Doubts are the ANTS in the PANTS of faith.* So, BRING your doubts to church, and be PART of this COMMUNITY of faith. Doubters are most WELCOME here! Amen.