

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, June 1, 2025

Let us pray. Faithful and ever loving God, you are with us in all of our moments, and you call us out of our lives into your presence. Be here with us today to enlighten our hearts and minds, to open our eyes and ears that we may see and experience you, and then nurture us to carry that experience into the world as we work toward your kingdom. Amen.

Our scripture comes from the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John. As Stephen shared with our children, it tells the story of Jesus's appearance to the disciples and Jesus's conversation with Thomas. Hear these words from the early church.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this he showed him his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas, who was called the twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus appeared, so 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 hand and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later the 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." Then he turned to Thomas and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God." Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I shared earlier, this is the last Sunday in the Easter season, the seventh Sunday of Easter and the last Sunday of our Easter sermon series, And There Christ Will Meet You. This text is probably familiar to us because typically it comes immediately after Easter One, Easter Sunday. We were joking about it in staff meeting that we have all preached on it because the Sunday after Easter is jokingly called Associate Pastor Sunday. And, yet, it is an important text in the life of our faith and one that we have deliberately chosen to end our Easter sermon series on, because it is about Doubting Thomas. Now, let's be honest. Thomas gets a pretty bad rap in our culture and in our scriptures. Unfortunately, he was not there when Jesus appeared the first time. Not his

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fault, he just wasn't there. Maybe he was out taking care of things that needed to be addressed rather than hiding away in fear, but who knows? And Thomas hears from the disciples about their experience and gives the most human answer possible. He says, "You guys are delusional in grief. After everything I have seen and been through in the last two weeks, I'm not going to believe until I can see it with my own eyes." To be fair to Thomas, when confronted with the empty tomb, no one said, "Aha, exactly as I predicted." Everyone, every single one of the disciples doubted, and yet for Thomas's doubt centuries have dubbed him Doubting Thomas, but this is the same Thomas who a handful of chapters earlier in the Gospel of John when the disciples were scared about entering Galilee even though their friend Lazarus was dying, Thomas says to Jesus, "If you go to die, I go with you." That doesn't sound like doubt to me.

Now for centuries the faithful have used this passage to create a dichotomy between faith and doubt. We hear it in Jesus's own words, "Do not doubt but believe." Too often we speak about faith as if it is the antithesis of doubt, as if deeper faith is the only answer to our questions about life, the universe, and everything, as if believing, as if consenting intellectually can limit our struggles with our world, our path, and our place. When we talk about faith this way, is it any wonder that churches are declining, that we're losing generations of believers? In 2025 nothing is certain. Nothing has been certain for a long time. Ideas change by the second. Boundaries of countries are constantly in flux. We are bombarded with new information every moment. Pluto's not a planet anymore. There's no such thing as a triceratops. Like, every day, something that we once held foundational changes. To frame faith as something that cannot be challenged is to alienate people and to discount our daily lived experience. Faith and doubt go hand in hand. They're not opposite sides of the same coin. They build on each other. Our scriptures witness to this. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the wisdom literature like the Psalms, they are replete with the faithful coming to God faithfully and in doubt. They cry out, "How long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever?" Abraham bargains with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, doubting God's decision to destroy the entire city. The experiences of our scriptures and my own personal experience teach me that doubt makes faith stronger. Admitting that we struggle as people of faith can help us trust even more. It's not a straight line that one leads to the other, but wrestling with what we believe helps practice those faith muscles. Questioning theology, studying the Bible, struggling with life applications, they make us ponder what we really and truly believe rather than simply repeating it rotely. We just prayed the Lord's Prayer. When is the last time you thought about the words to the Lord's Prayer? When is the last time you've thought about the imagery in the hymns we sing? Part of developing an adult faith is making faith your own. It's taking all of the things that you've been taught and told and holding them at arms length and figuring out what makes sense to you and what doesn't. Naming where you struggle, where

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your rough edges are. Doubt can help give us ownership of our own faith in a way that blind allegiance does not.

One of the things that I value most about the Presbyterian Church is the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and thought that are represented in a room when we gather. We are not told we have to uncritically believe anything. Often we disagree with one another, but together as a body we represent the plurality of a community of faith, not a monolith of belief. But I firmly believe that that itself leaves room for the spirit to move and change us as a people of faith.

And yet, trusting God is not ever easy to do, particularly when you are in the midst of painful doubt. It's why the platitudes like God has a plan fall short in the face of cancer, job loss, and death. Sometimes we cannot make sense, often we cannot make sense of the world and our experiences in it. We cannot intellectualize it, but naming our frustration, our doubt, our fear, and our anger, naming them to each other and to God, means that we are not carrying them alone. And that, in my experience, does help. When we are able to bring the fullness of who we are to God, we find a rest and a comfort that cannot be matched; because, trust me, God can handle our doubt, our anger, and even our distrust. Our God is bigger than all of that.

Doubt was not the end of Thomas's story despite what we name him. Doubt led Thomas to add difficult questions. Doubt led him to an experience of the divine that changed the world. Doubt led Thomas to a faith statement of the simplest and most powerful, "My Lord and my God."

What I think is clear from our scriptures is that people of the resurrection, Easter people like we name ourselves, we do not need to have it all figured out. We're not supposed to have it all figured out before coming to church or helping a neighbor or feeding the hungry or caring for those in need. If we are required to have it all figured out ahead of time, we'll never even get started. Friends, we believe as well as doubt; and believing we act; even in a fragile belief, we reach out. We feed, we care, we tend, we struggle, we work, we love, all without guarantees or complete understanding because of a promise from the God who continues to bless those who believe amid doubt and keep faith amid uncertainty,

Friends, we believe and trust our lives to the message of the resurrection without having all our questions answered. As Steven shared with the children, we don't have the opportunity to put our hand in Jesus's fingers or his hand or his side. We believe having not yet seen, but doubt is part of that. We wrestle with our faith, but we hold fast to its affirmation that even in the midst of our doubt, God is with us and calls us to be with the world. Thomas should be an example for us

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rather than a punchline. Thomas was willing to die with Jesus, willing to be changed by the spirit, willing to be shaped by an experience with the divine. May we all be like that, knowing and trusting that Christ meets us even in our doubt. Amen.