

When a friend shares a story from a website, do you like to check the information ? If you do, then you have something in common with Thomas. I admit that I am someone who likes to check the facts.

Thomas is often called doubting Thomas. However, he might also be called evidence-based Thomas. When his friends told him something that sounded surprising , even unbelievable, he wanted to see for himself. The other disciples had seen the evidence; they had examined the marks in Jesus' hands. Thomas was no different; he wanted to see that evidence, too.

Yesterday was Earth Day and also the March for Science. I did not attend the March for Science yesterday, due to prior commitments to fly gliders as an instructor at Wave Camp. As you know, I am a scientist. I have been trained to read critically, and to evaluate the evidence myself, not merely to rely on someone else's interpretation. I like to see the evidence and check the facts. Facts don't need to be believed to be true. They stand all on their own. Facts can be verified.

Nonetheless, even facts can be misused. What data points do you leave in, or take out? Do you run statistics on the data? Are they the correct type of statistical tests for the type of data collected? And I don't quite understand the currently popular "alternative facts."

Recall in the passion narrative, how, when he was questioning Jesus, Pilate asked "what is truth?" That question is in many ways at the heart of science. And at the same time, truth is more than facts. There are stories that are true without being factual. Such stories often illustrate aspects of human nature. Truth is more than facts. Facts can lead to truth. It takes thought, reflection and analysis to discern the truth from facts. People may say "the facts speak for themselves" but that is an oversimplification. Raw facts may not tell the whole story.

In the Greek, he is not called doubting Thomas, the word used has the meaning of not-yet-believing. Thomas needed to have a personal encounter with the risen Jesus in order to recognize that Jesus was truly more than just his good friend and mentor, that Jesus had a special connection to God.

Today, we, too, have our own encounters with Jesus of various types, and it is those encounters that lead to belief and belonging in the Christian family. Many of us also like to see for ourselves. We crave a personal encounter with Jesus, we pray for it, and if we do not experience it, we may be overcome by doubt, wondering if there is really a point to religion.

Today's gospel story is not the only place in John's gospel where Thomas is mentioned. Earlier in the story, (ch14) Jesus said to the disciples: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'

Thomas was the one who was bold enough to say that he did not understand what Jesus was talking about. In classrooms, when one student asks a question about the material, it is likely that other students also were not clear on that point. With Thomas in this situation, that is likely also true. Thomas seems to be a practical man with an enquiring mind that wants to know. And he also seems to be a man who takes things literally. In today's gospel, he wants to know that Jesus has risen, he wants to be assured that the story the other disciples have told him is true, and he needs to see and experience it for himself. Thomas is not afraid to express the tough questions, the questions that others are afraid to ask out loud.

And those questions that some people are afraid to express are usually questions that need to be asked. They may be questions that have no simple answer, that need to be examined, grappled with, pondered, and investigated.

Why did Jesus appear to that group of disciples at that time, when Thomas was not present? Was it coincidence that Thomas was not there? Was there some special timing that made that the appropriate moment for Jesus to appear to them? Was Thomas away for only an hour, or for some days? The particular appearance of Jesus we heard about in today's gospel was on Easter evening, the very same day when at dawn the women had found the tomb empty, and met the risen Jesus, who was not entirely like the living Jesus.

That difference between the risen Jesus and Jesus in life, may also have contributed to Thomas' need for evidence. Thomas rejoined the disciples, and was told this new story of Jesus' appearing to them, yet it was a full week later (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter) before Jesus reappeared to the disciples, this time with Thomas among them. And when he did, Jesus invited Thomas to touch his wounds, so that he might satisfy his need for proof. I suspect that long before his death and resurrection, Jesus was well-aware of this need Thomas had for seeing the evidence.

And at the end of today's gospel lesson, John writes "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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." As Jesus knew that Thomas needed to see and touch in order to believe, John understood the need that people have to have evidence presented to them in order that they might understand and be convinced.

There is nothing wrong with questioning and searching and digging deeper when it comes to the fundamental precepts that guide our lives. Be like Thomas and do not be afraid to ask questions. The investigation of these questions can lead us to greater depths in our understanding of ourselves and of God.

Amen.

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