

Many mainline pastors use the Revised Common Lectionary to guide what scripture should be chosen for a gospel text for each week of the year. It brings this passage up every year right after Easter. I am a faithful follower of the RCL as it is known because it helps me focus on passages I might want to avoid. It ensures that a broad range of gospel readings are presented in a three-year cycle. So, for most of my ministry, I have preached this passage every year. What made it possible for me is that it focuses on my favorite disciple, Thomas, which keeps me from feeling like, “Here we go again, at least until now.”

Now, let us delve into the story of a disciple who holds a special place in my heart, Thomas.

John 20

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.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then, the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If 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. ²⁵ 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 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.” ²⁷ Then 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.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus 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. ³¹ 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.

The Word of God

The word of life

How would you like to be negatively labeled forever like Doubting Thomas? He is not Thomas; he is Doubting Thomas. But there is more to him than that. He shows bravery, loyalty, and deep faithfulness. He asks questions when he doesn't know the answer. He exhibits vulnerability and is faithful.

Before we can really hear this text speak, we must deal with antisemitism first. The Gospel of John is the source of much of the historical antisemitism that has plagued the Christian Faith and our world. This bigotry is more pronounced at this time of year. I mentioned that much of what bothers me is just a translation issue. Where the many Bible translations of John's Gospel read the Jews, it should more accurately read the Jewish authorities. These folks were a tiny portion of the Jewish population in Jesus' day and did not represent the heart and soul of Judaism—but instead served at the whim of the Roman authorities.

The last time I commented on this, I shared my concern that an unreflective reading of the gospel of John at our Community Good Friday service overlooked the issue of antisemitism. I was grateful that the Good Friday service exhibited sensitivity to the issue this year.

We may not always notice it, but this antisemitism is still all around us. From unreflective scripture readings to chants by Christian Nationalists, "The Jews will not replace us," and acts of violence and terrorism against the Jewish community. The current conflict in the Middle East has escalated this antisemitism. And no matter your opinion on the war, there is no excuse for antisemitism, hate speech of any kind, and violent terrorism against anyone.

The gospels must not be used to support antisemitism, for they all tell that Jesus was born, lived, was executed, and raised from the dead as a Jew. Most of his first

followers were Jewish. It is from our Scriptures that we are repeatedly told that it was from the Jewish people that God would bless the world.

Yes, I know that because I grew up Jewish, I am very sensitive to it.

I remember being young at home alone on a Sunday afternoon, lying on the couch and watching TV and seeing Jewish people being herded onto railway cars and taken to prison camps to be gassed. I also recall the emaciated bodies of the survivors. This frightened me more than any Dracula, Frankenstein, or Werewolf movie could. I still have a very difficult time watching a Holocaust movie or even hearing that signature European train whistle.

I had this picture in my psyche long before I learned about bigotry, redlining, and restrictive covenants that kept minorities, including Jews, from buying property in certain areas to Country Club restrictions barring Jews from membership.

I take pride in my Jewish heritage. Though I was never ultra-religious, I always knew I was Jewish, and that made me who I am, and I didn't renounce that heritage when I became a follower of Jesus.

With this in mind, we can now turn to the story of Thomas, who was labeled as Doubting Thomas forever.

He is my favorite Disciple, and I find him much more complex than any simplistic label, and I want to redeem him. I want to help us see him as more than a label as we remember that we are all more than labels we have been given. We all know how labels can be painful and damaging, leaving permanent scars. That's why so many parents resist having children prematurely given a label in school that they may carry with them all the way through school and throughout their lives. This is complicated by the requirement that a child be labeled to get the special help they need. Labels can affect even how they come to see themselves.

Labeling can do significant damage to a person. We know premature labeling can have drastic damaging consequences, even when done by well-meaning social service and educational institutions. Those labels can persist throughout life and, all too

often, are internalized so that a person begins to see themselves as their label. This is deadly to our souls. This has been borne out most recently by the devastating effects of cyberbullying, especially on adolescents and especially girls. Estimates vary from about 9 to 27 percent of all adolescents who have been victims of bullying by way of technology.

This shaming and ridicule are painful and can have deadly effects. It is one of many factors that cause suicidal thoughts for these people, and it should be remembered that the leading cause of death for adolescents is suicide. It is so rampant that it is recommended that physicians should screen for evidence of cyberbullying.
<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/cyberbullying-linked-suicidal-thoughts-attempts-young-adolescents>

I dislike the label “Doubting” for Thomas. It is unfair and inaccurate. In the Gospel of John, he is much more than a doubter, and a close reading of the Gospel of John indicates this. Wouldn't it be horrible to be remembered just for an incident that was misinterpreted and ignores all the good things you have done? And yet, many of us suffer from the terrible scars of such labeling.

Fortunately, things have changed since I was a kid from a Jewish single-parent home led by a male, I was a motherless child. Now, there is a label—motherless child. I also remember when people were known by and labeled by their disability. He is an epileptic, and she is retarded. People First language reminds us that people are more complex than a simple label and that people must never be reduced to a label.

So, let's look at the real Thomas and I will offer a few more descriptive terms.

1. He was Brave. Thomas in John 11, Thomas is all in when Jesus tells the disciples he is going to the tomb of Lazarus, who has died. He steps up, knowing what Jesus can do and the trouble it will cause. Thomas knows if Jesus does one of his signs there and there is only one sign Jesus can perform, raising Lazarus, the authorities will seek his life. Knowing this, Thomas responds, “Let us also go, that we may die with him (John 11:16). Thomas's summons to the rest of the followers is dramatic. This does not mean he will not drift away at the crucifixion, but at this moment, he is willing to give his life in the service of Jesus. Thomas is ready to go the last mile with Jesus out

of loyalty. And he calls on the others to join him in going with Jesus, even in the face of death. I want to be that faithful and loyal to Jesus.

In addition, in our story today, the disciples are all hiding, but Thomas is not with them. He is not hiding with them when Jesus appears to the other disciples. Maybe he believed Mary Magdalene, so he was out there doing Jesus' work. We don't know, but we do know that while the disciples were hiding in fear, Thomas was not hiding with them. They feared the religious police. So, they huddled in the upper room, cringing every time the floor creaked. Jesus came to them and gave them peace instead of fear. And Thomas is not there with the disciples. We don't know why, but Thomas wasn't locked up behind closed doors, trembling with fear like the other disciples when Jesus appeared.

2. Thomas asked questions. He dared to ask questions when he didn't understand. Jesus' disciples often seemed confused and lacked understanding. Unlike the rest of the disciples, when Thomas didn't know what Jesus was talking about, he didn't fake understanding. He asked. Remember the wonderful part of John 14? Jesus says he is going away to prepare a place for the disciples. And you know where I am going and the way he says, somewhat cryptically. Thomas speaks up (verse 5). "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" To which we get one of the most hopeful answers in the Bible. "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." We can argue about how to interpret this: no one comes to the Father except by me. I have always taken it to mean that because of what God has done in Jesus, we all belong to God. His cross and resurrection are the way there for all of us. But the important thing for us today is Thomas asks Jesus what he is talking about. And Jesus answers. If more of the disciples had been like Thomas, asking when they didn't understand, they might not have been huddled in fear on that first night when Jesus came to them. They would have seen the cross as a victory, not defeat.

It is okay to ask questions; it is vital to ask them, especially when they are questions backed by a genuine desire to understand. Someone once said the only stupid question is the one we don't ask.

As Robin Sharma says, “One of the fastest ways to find the solution to an issue or challenge you are facing is to ask the right questions.” But we must ask. Thomas is an asker of questions. What if we exhibited this bravery to ask questions when we don’t understand?

3. Thomas exhibits vulnerability. The following week, Thomas is hurt. He feels like he doesn’t belong, all because he was not there when Jesus appeared. The rest of the disciples share a common experience, and he wants that experience, too. Jesus appeared to them but not to Thomas. They saw his wounds. Thomas is the odd man out. Everyone else has a common understanding, and he doesn’t share it. It’s like going to a party where everyone seems to know everyone, and you are just on the outside standing in the corner looking at everyone, or at a dinner event, sitting with folks who all know each other, and you know none of them. Sometimes, it can be painful to be left out, even if the folks don’t mean to make you feel that way. Or even worse, everyone is invited but you because you don’t fit in; you didn’t get that invitation to a birthday party like your classmates did. He is still with the disciples but doesn’t share the bonding experience of meeting the risen Christ. Thomas knows our pain of being different. He cries out that he needs to encounter Jesus. He is in pain, the hurt of not belonging. Thomas wants to see the risen Jesus and he wants to belong. That is why Jesus comes to him; he comes in his place of hurt. And that is where Jesus can come to us when we open ourselves in our place of hurt and vulnerability. Jesus transforms Thomas from an outsider to one of the crew again, from hurting to healed Thomas. One writer put it wonderfully: I don’t know if Thomas touched Jesus, but Jesus certainly touched Thomas where he hurt and promised to do the same for us.

By the touch of Christ, he moves from outsider to model of faithfulness.

4. Thomas is Faithful. He utters the highest confession of faith in Jesus in all Scripture: He cries out, “My Lord and My God.” After being touched soul-deep by Jesus, Thomas models a confession of faith for the ages.

Like everyone, Thomas is much deeper than the surface label he might have been given and still carries around. And so are other people. We must work on this, seeing

that people are more than any one label; they are complex children of God, richly blessed, and part of the rainbow tapestry of our beautiful world. And so are we.