

**"For the Scarred, Scared and Just Not Sure"**

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Texts: Psalm 133 and John 20: 19-31

Doubts and uncertainty about many things are common in today's world.

Here we are, our first Sunday of in-person worship in thirteen months, and yet unsure if this is the right decision. I'm not here to debate whether we are right or wrong, or a little of both, because, frankly, I don't know. Only time will tell.

History always has 20/20 vision and I'm sure many things about this pandemic and how we faced it, both in the church and in the whole world, will be dissected for many years to come. Brace yourself, because no matter who you are, someone will tell you that you should have handled this differently. It's one of the few things that you can count on...people in the future judging you for something they never experienced. It's important that we do this work to learn from our history so that we don't repeat it in our future. At the same time, we spend a lot of time questioning, challenging, and demonizing one another. In John's Gospel (among other places) we encounter someone who has experienced

that reality all too well. You've heard of him. His name is Thomas. Many have called him, most of the time disparagingly, "doubting Thomas".

I think just about everyone in the world has heard about Thomas. Funny how it is that some people receive a moniker and they never can shake it. The funny thing about it is that most anyone who is honest has had, or is having, or will have, a serious bout of doubt not only once, but several times, about matters of faith. And yet it is so easy to scapegoat poor Thomas, who likely was not the man we imagine, but was a caricature of those among Jesus' followers who doubted. Gerard Sloyan, in his commentary on John, writes, "Thomas, rather than being thought of as the sole or even an egregious doubter, should be considered the subject of John's dramatizing technique. He stands for a spirit that was abroad in the early community. The Evangelist [meaning the writer of the book of John] makes Thomas a caricature in the specificity of his demands about touching the wounds (v25)...John's intent is doubtless apologetic and tells us something of the doubts and denials voiced in his day." In other words, doubt is nothing new and is not the result of one person's bad faith.

But I want to look at it from another perspective. Although Jesus says that those who have not seen are blessed, he never chastises Thomas. In fact, he

grants Thomas what he needs to be able to believe. Further, as Brian McLaren states in his chapter on this story from *We Make the Road By Walking*, “[There is] one thing you have to say about Thomas: even though he didn’t believe at first, he stayed with us, open to the possibility that his doubt could be transformed into faith. He kept coming back. He kept showing up. If he hadn’t wanted to believe, he had a week to leave and go back home. But he didn’t. He stayed. Not believing but wanting to believe.”

In today’s world, there are many people who name themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” or “seeking”. It may be that some people in those groups have or will grace our church with their presence. They are likely to be a lot like Thomas. Unsure. Maybe scared. Most likely they have been scarred, by church and/or by family, for their disbelief, or their spiritual seeking that is outside the norm. Most younger people today never attended a Sunday school, or if they did, it’s not their greatest memory. Doubters often have a rough time in the Christian church with its creeds and dogmas, beliefs and litmus tests for membership and participation. And yet, they continue to show up in our congregations. I think it’s always been true, but it is almost one hundred percent true now, that most people who come through our church doors for the first time have either never been a part of a church, or they have been hurt by the church.

I'm not sure that those of us who grew up in the church have any idea what it takes for people to cross the threshold of that door from the outside to the inside of a church building. In fact, many people will not attend an in-church wedding ceremony but will choose instead to head straight for the reception. If you ask them, there are a variety of reasons for that, but one of them is often that those who don't attend church don't feel welcome in any church. Turned off, turned away in some cases, turned down in other cases, they simply have had enough with a church full of certainty in an uncertain world.

That was a lot to say and I hope that you understand what I'm trying to get at here. One of the best practices of this congregation is that we open our worship service with a welcome statement that opens with, "No matter who you are". That's pretty good. It's a broad, inclusive statement..."no matter who you are." But I think the second part is as important as the first, "or where you are on life's journey." Friends, contrary to what most of us grew up with, faith is not a one-time thing. Today's firm belief statement is followed by tomorrow's questions, depending on what life throws at us. Like the Thomas character of John's Gospel, who was earlier a strongly faithful person, sometimes we encounter doubt, indecision, disruption, disorientation, and sometimes flat-out rejection of our faith. Wouldn't it be nice if we never had doubt? I must tell you,



though, I would love to spend many hours with someone questioning their faith. Not to necessarily convince them, but to travel alongside them in their indecision or moment of doubt. Most people avoid the pastor when they have doubts. Oh, if we could only change that! Then, we'll truly become a Jesus movement.

McLaren writes beautifully about what I'm trying to say here.

From that night, we learned something essential about what this uprising was going to be about. It isn't just for brave people, but for scared folks like us who are willing to become brave. It isn't just for believers, but for doubting folks like Thomas who want to believe in spite of their skepticism. It isn't just for good people, but for normal, flawed people like you and me and Thomas and Peter...We have a term for what we began to experience that night: *fellowship*. Fellowship is a kind of belonging that isn't based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions. It's not the kind of belonging you find at the top of the ladder among those who think they are the best, but at the bottom among all the rest, with all the other failures and losers who have either climbed the ladder and fallen, or never gotten up enough gumption to climb in this first place. Whatever else this uprising will become, from that night we've known it is an uprising of fellowship, a community where anyone who wants to be part of us will be welcome. Jesus showed us his scars and we're starting to realize we don't have to hide ours.

Wouldn't it be nice to find something of a community that embodied the practice that we are welcome, scars and all, to be a part of it, should we choose?

That's a tall order. Much easier said than done, and we will make mistakes. We do not always include the people we intend to. We will not live up to the full meaning of our welcome statement in every moment. But the fact that we have

dedicated ourselves to this goal, to this fellowship of “scarred people, scared people, and for those who want to believe but aren’t sure what or how to believe”, then we become the best of Christian fellowship and community. We don’t have to focus so much on doing it right but loving one another to become “the best version of ourselves” we can be. In the words of McLaren, “When we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again, to believe again, to hope again, to live again. Through fellowship, a little locked room becomes the biggest space in the world. In that space of fellowship, the Holy Spirit fills us like a deep breath of fresh air.”

A little room, even a little locked room, can become the biggest space in the world. May we create space for one another, and for those who might wish to come among us, to become the best version of ourselves possible. In trial and in rejoicing may we find a way forward together – both the certain and the doubter – to a future we can now only imagine.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.