

Today's reading from the Gospel of John is one of my favorite passages from my favorite Gospel. After all, what is not to like about a Gospel named "John"? Right?

We may wonder why Thomas would have "doubt" at all since he had been with Jesus for three years. The story may also call to mind that perhaps we have some of our own doubts about the Resurrection of Jesus.

When Jesus had proposed going to Bethany, and then on to Jerusalem after he and confronted the Jewish leaders, Thomas' reaction had been: " Let us also go, that we may die with him " Thomas never lacked courage. He was the disciple who expected Jesus to be put to death. When what he had expected had happened, he was broken-hearted, so broken-hearted that he chose to be alone with his grief.

Thomas faced his suffering and his sorrow alone. So it happened that, when Jesus first appeared to his Disciples, Thomas was not there. The news that Jesus had come back seemed to him far too good to be true, and he refused to believe it.

When Jesus came back again a week later, Thomas was there. And Jesus knew Thomas's heart. He repeated Thomas's own words and invited him to do what he required. 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." Thomas responded in love and devotion, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas had made one mistake. He withdrew from the fellowship of his friends. And because he was not there with his fellow Disciples, he missed the first coming of Jesus. We miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from our Christian fellowship

and try to be alone. Things can happen to us within the fellowship of Christ's Church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow comes and sadness overwhelms us, we often tend to shut ourselves up and refuse to meet people. That is the very time when, despite our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of our community, for it is here that we are most likely to meet Jesus face to face.

But Thomas had two great virtues: First, he absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. He was not the kind of person who would rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about. Thomas had to be sure. There is more ultimate faith in the person who insists on being sure than in the one who glibly repeats things which he or she has never thought out.

Thomas' other great virtue was that when he was sure, he went the whole way. " My Lord and my God! " he said. There was nothing halfway about Thomas. He doubted in order to become sure. And when he did, his surrender to certainty was complete.

Doubting as Thomas doubted, can bring us to our ultimate faith: *belief that Jesus is “**my Lord and my God.**”*

Let me be bold enough to ask you a question. Do you, without any reservation, believe Jesus rose from the dead? Do you? Or do you have at least a little doubt that that could really have happened?

As many of you know, I have been a Hospice chaplain for about 25 years. Over those years I have asked those same questions of patients. I get a variety of answers like these:

- I have been a Christian all my life, but I'm still not sure.
- I never really thought about it.

- I have my doubts.
- If I don't believe it, and there is a Hell, I do not want to end up there.
- It just never made sense to me. It is too improbable.

How would you answer the question do you really believe Jesus rose from the dead?

If you are tentative, or even admit you do not believe, what would you need to believe?

Thomas needed physical evidence. We are not going to get that. Jesus said to Thomas, "You became a believer because you saw me. Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

So, again, *what would you need?*

Here is the second story within the story of Thomas: Jesus does not want us to doubt. The consequences for us are too high. As he told Thomas, "Do not doubt but believe."

Would you believe if you could find convincing proof in scripture? If so, take heart in the story in Luke's Gospel about two disciples who are walking to the town of Emmaus after Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus joined them and asked why they were downcast. They said that a mighty prophet, they were hoping would be the one to redeem Israel had been crucified. Jesus then interpreted for them all the scriptures which referred to him. At dinner he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. Then they said to each other how their hearts were burning while Jesus spoke to them on the way and *opened the scriptures to them*. They received the faith they required through understanding scripture.

Perhaps you are troubled by things you have done or said in your life. If so, look to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son who turned his back on his father and demanded his inheritance. We all know how that ended. His father was waiting for him and, when he first saw his son a long way off, he was filled with compassion, and he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him, and welcomed him back into his family. We often think the father in this parable is God, but it is also Jesus, patiently waiting for us to return to him. He will welcome us back.

Is your disbelief due to thinking it is just too late for you? Then look to Matthew and the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. Remember this story? The owner of a vineyard needed workers to pick grapes, so he goes out at dawn to hire some workers, agreeing with them to work at the daily wage. He then went out at 9:00 and hired workers, agreeing to pay them “what is just.” He went out again about noon, and about 3:00 and at 5:00. At the end of the day, he first paid the workers hired at 5:00 the wages for a full day. When those workers hired at dawn protested, the owner said that he could do what he wanted to treat all workers justly. If we read this parable with Jesus being the owner, we see that he desires to include everyone in his kingdom and that he desires to treat all justly.

Or perhaps you once believed, and your faith slipped away. Well, in both Matthew and Luke we have the parable of the Lost Sheep. In this short parable, Jesus asks,

“What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it upon his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to

them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance."

Jesus will find those who are lost.

You may have suffered a loss or an unanswered prayer. If so, please reflect on the story of Lazarus. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was sick and close to death, and for him to please come to heal their brother. But Jesus does not come. By the time he went to their home, Lazarus had died and been in a tomb for four days. When Jesus arrived Martha said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." She was heartbroken and critical of Jesus for not coming. But she still had faith. And because of her faith, her brother was restored to life. We may not be as fortunate as Martha, but Jesus will always understand our anger when we approach him with faith.

I could go on and on with other examples of how Jesus helps us overcome our doubt. But I won't. I know, you are thinking, "Thanks be to God." Yet I do have one more to illustrate the depth of Jesus' love.

Perhaps you have denied that Jesus rose from the dead, and you fear that this past denial will keep you out of Heaven, so why try to believe? Recall that Peter denied he knew Jesus three times after he was arrested. The Resurrected Jesus, while with the disciples in Galilee, took Peter aside and asked him three times if he loved him. Peter said "yes" to each question. Without asking about any of his denials or the reasons for them, Jesus forgave him.

Whatever our circumstances, Jesus wants us to believe. Our Lord is a wonderful Lord, full of love and compassion. He will never give up on us. He wants us to know that he is our Lord and our savior. We can always count on him. When we grasp this and believe in him, our doubts disappear. Do not doubt but believe. Then we will say what Thomas emphatically exclaimed: **My Lord and My God.**