

I love the questions our youth often feel free to ask. In fact, I wish more adults would feel as free to ask similar questions. Anyway, on multiple occasions, I have received questions from our young people regarding faith, the life of Jesus, questions about the existence of God, and questions that show they have doubt about many aspects of faith. I truly encourage these questions because that is how we learn, that is how we grow, and that is how we are taken to new places. Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, once said, "Live the questions!" I truly believe that is the best way we learn. I also believe that as Christians, when we ask questions, we need to be honest about our **doubt**. Far too often the church has discouraged doubt. However, doubt is really a healthy aspect of faith. In fact, theologian, Paul Tillich, said doubt is a very necessary element of faith. And, theologian, Frederick Buechner, writes these words about doubt, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." (*Wishful Thinking*) In other words, doubt is not only an element of faith, doubt becomes the process through which faith grows and faith is deepened. Vibrant, living faith is nurtured and born in the mix of a rich environment

where we have the freedom to ask questions, voice our doubts, articulate our wonderings about this person we call Jesus, and let go of old even elementary images of God. For all of us, there is a real need for our old understandings of Jesus and our old understanding of faith to die. Our old understandings need to be eaten away by doubts so that a new and deeper faith may be born.

In today's gospel reading, questions and doubt come to the forefront in the story of Thomas. However, the truth is that **all** the disciples were questioning and experiencing doubt. It is the day of the resurrection and here we find the disciples sitting in a room behind locked doors because of fear, **doubt**, and quite likely more than a little shame. They have blown it completely, they are hiding in fear, and they are doubting everything their master had said. And, what is so fascinating is that, in the gospel of John, when Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection, **nobody, not one person**, initially recognizes him. Notice in the beginning of today's reading, the disciples do not recognize him until Jesus shows them his hands and side. **They doubted him! They doubted it was Jesus!** It is **only after** Jesus shows them his hands and side that the disciples rejoice because they have seen the Lord. While the other disciples also doubt, for some strange reason, only Thomas gets labeled "doubter."

Far too often we judge Thomas because of his doubt. We need to cut him some slack and give him a break. In Thomas we find the yearning of one who desperately wants to see with his eyes and touch with his hands that of which he has been told. He has real questions, real concerns, and a desire for a **real** encounter with the risen Lord. I think the story of Thomas captures our hearts and minds because we, too, were absent to the Resurrection experience two thousand years ago. When faced with the mystery of the Resurrection, the story of Thomas names that part in each of us that wants to scream out, “Show me!”

Thomas has just had a very harsh encounter with reality. Reality had hit hard in the form of a cross when his dear friend had been crucified. And, when he fled that horrible scene, not only had **Jesus** died, Thomas’ hopes and dreams had **also** died. Jesus’ crucifixion had **destroyed** his hopes for the future and very poignantly reminded him that **there is an end**. And, it is the same for us. When the harsh realities of life hit **us** – whether it be the death of a family member, the loss of a job, an unexpected illness, a broken relationship, aspects of this pandemic, or whatever – reality deeply cuts into our hopes, our dreams, the very fabric of our relationships, and **we** are reminded that **there is an end**. There is an

end over which we have no control as we feel we have been taken captive by an extremely **cruel conqueror**.

The reality that sliced into Thomas's hopes and dreams left him emotionally bleeding and broken. As he again joins the community of disciples, within the context of those who proclaim Jesus is alive, Thomas **lays bare his doubt**. He is very honest about his doubt as he says, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." In the depth of his despair Thomas articulates his doubt, and it is in **that place** where he is now confronted with the risen Christ. It is in that place of despair that Thomas is greeted by the risen Lord whose presence exudes forgiveness and grace as he hears the words, "Peace be with you." In that moment, Thomas **knows** he is in the presence of God and he **believes**.

Theologian, David Lose, describes the experience of Thomas in this way:

When Thomas is greeted by the forgiveness and grace embodied in the words, "Peace be with you," he instantly believes and makes the great confession of John's gospel: "My Lord and my God!" In a heartbeat Thomas knows that he is in the presence of God, has been saved and redeemed by that God, and that he will never be the same again.

Thomas lays bare his doubt which takes him to this encounter with the grace of God, embodied and enfleshed in the risen Lord Jesus. Doubt

drives him to question and it takes him to this place where he is encountered by the risen Lord and his entire reality is changed. Wow!! Did you get that? Reality **itself** has changed. The despairing Thomas does **not escape** from the real world and there is **not** a break from the tangible reality of the world. No. But, there is something very different, something very, very new. God's grace and God's kingdom have **invaded** the real world, **transformed** it and **nothing** will ever be the same again.

I think Thomas experiences Easter in the way many of us begin to experience it. Thomas finally gets Easter when he brings forth his questions. He wants to see and touch. He wants tangible proof and needs his own encounter before he can trust the story. It is **doubt** that compels Thomas to ask the questions and it is **doubt** that takes him to the place where he is looking for what is really real and what truly matters. You see, without doubt, our faith is shallow and rootless. We fail to go down deep. Doubt is a sign of a healthy and deep-rooted faith, though most of us are taught to believe the opposite. And, when doubt takes us to the deeper places in faith our reality changes. We are transformed and our perspective on all of life changes as we live into a new reality.

This is what Easter is all about and what Easter means for each one of us. This new reality is a way of life, expressed as we come together to

worship and be fed by the very life of the Risen Christ. We participate in the work of our risen Lord and live into this new reality as we see the hungry in this world and work for change, whether it is by distributing bags of food to Okemos families so they can have an Easter dinner, by filling our micro pantries, or working with the refugees who are living in the Parish House as we help to provide for them a life of hope. We live this new reality when we intentionally work to end extreme poverty, racism, and work to bring healing and wholeness to the environment and the profound brokenness in this world God so deeply **loves**.

As the community of faith gathers and we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, voice our doubts and ask our questions, Jesus **does** appear. The community of faith is **not** the place where we have and know all the answers. It is a place where a searching faith can develop and become authentic and alive. Such an environment creates the space for an authentic encounter with God as the risen Christ appears. The story of Thomas, his questions and his doubt, is one of the most compelling, believable, realistic stories in the Bible because it is **our story**. Doubt and the questions that arise are the very heartbeat of our faith! And, the risen Christ is always breaking into our doubt and our questions and working to make us new. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!