

April 3, Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

by [Shawnthea Monroe](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

Outside the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsemane, there is a sign that reads, "Please: no explanations in the church." It is meant as a warning to the hundreds of tour groups who pass through the sacred space every day. But it reminds me of something a cranky old minister once said to my mother during her confirmation class: "The church is no place for questions, young lady!"

Anyone who has felt the sting of such a rebuke rejoices on the Second Sunday of Easter, when we read the story of Thomas, the patron saint of doubters. John's Gospel tells us that the disciples are gathered in a room late on Easter Sunday, and the mood is bleak. Every plan and hope for the future rested with Jesus, and now he is dead. There are incredible stories of a resurrection, but the disciples remain unconvinced. How can it be?

Then, without warning, Jesus appears in their midst. "Peace be with you," he says, and he shows them his hands. The disciples recognize Jesus by his words and his wounds, and they rejoice: The Lord is alive; all is not lost!

But Thomas isn't there when this happens. Likely lost in the throes of his own grief, Thomas misses his chance. Later the others are telling him wild tales: "We have seen the Lord!"

This is too much for Thomas. Didn't they all dismiss Mary Magdalene's story? So he makes an outrageous remark: "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." It's a brazen statement that reveals the depth of Thomas's doubt, and some people interpret it as a sorry lack of faith. Is it?

Paul Tillich, in his classic book *Dynamics of Faith*, claims that doubt is in fact an inescapable and essential part of faith. According to Tillich, faith is what happens when a finite being is "grasped by and turned to the infinite." Because we are limited in our understanding, there will always be things about the infinite nature and character of God that we cannot understand, try as we might. Yet Tillich believes it is important to try. In his view, an unquestioning faith is no faith at all,

because it shows a lack of engagement with the divine.

Tillich also believes a questioning faith requires an element of risk, and more than a little courage. To ask a question is to risk an answer. As he puts it, “Where there is daring and courage, there is the possibility of failure.” Sometimes we ask questions and receive no answer. Sometimes we ask questions and don’t like the answer we receive. These are the risks we take when we honestly engage the divine.

In Thomas’s case, though, the real risk is in success. He has made an audacious demand of God, in essence daring Jesus to show himself. I doubt that Thomas considers for a moment the possibility that Jesus will oblige him.

Thomas is a devoted follower of Jesus. This is probably why he doubts the veracity of the resurrection stories. To suggest that the beloved rabbi is back from the dead seems disrespectful, a fairy tale that undermines Jesus’ message and ministry. Of course Thomas is deeply skeptical, and who can blame him?

In truth, the Easter story raises more questions than it answers. But we have to take these questions seriously. After all, the stakes are very high. If true, the resurrection is an extraordinary event with life-changing implications. If Jesus—who was crucified, who died and was buried—has been raised, then all bets are off. He’s not just another wise sage and champion of the oppressed; he is the Christ, the Son of God, and he might expect a lot more of his followers. “Easter is that time of year when Christians ask themselves two questions,” says Garrison Keillor. “Do I really believe all this stuff? And if so, why do I live this way?”

Perhaps Thomas knows exactly what is at stake, and this makes him willing to express his doubts without giving up on his faith. According to John’s Gospel, Thomas stays with the other disciples even though he does not share in their resurrection fantasy. A week later, Jesus reappears. He speaks a word of peace to the disciples and then tells Thomas to touch the holes in his hands and the wound in his side.

Some scholars read these words in a tone of rebuke. I think Jesus is being kind. I imagine Thomas gently touching the damaged hands as he says, “My Lord and my God!” Encountering the risen Christ, Thomas has the answer he was searching for, and it transforms him.

According to tradition, after Pentecost Thomas traveled beyond the limits of the Roman Empire, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. He is thought to have gotten as far as southwest India. To this day, along the Malabar Coast in the state of Kerala, there are still a large number of believers who call themselves “Christians of St. Thomas.” Thomas is also the patron saint of architects, because he built so many churches. Not bad for a doubter.

Maybe Thomas succeeded as an evangelist because he started as a doubter. Someone who has asked the hard questions, risked receiving answers, and learned to live with uncertainty can be a powerful witness to Jesus Christ, who is not dead, but living.