

Finding God in the Questions

John 20:19-31

April 15, 2007

Do you remember the movie “The Christmas Story” that is replayed on television every year during the month of December? There is a scene in that movie in which Ralphie, the little boy who is the main character, goes outside and touches his tongue to a steel pole... and it sticks! I remember my son Chris saying to me one cold December day when he was about 10 years old, “What if I did that? Would my tongue stick?” He didn’t take me for my word, and so had to try it himself on the basketball goal post in the back yard. Yep. It stuck.

Kids always have those “what if” questions. What if I drank 10 root beer floats at one time? What if cows could really jump over the moon? What if I had gills? Would I be able to swim like a fish? What if the President came over for dinner? What would we serve him? What if I hit my sister? Will you be mad at me?

Those questions don’t always stop when we reach adulthood. I remember asking my mother and father what would happen if I chose to get married before I went to seminary.

We also ask a lot of “why” questions. Why is the sky blue? Why is the grass green? Why do I have to eat my vegetables? Why can’t I hit my sister? Why do I have to go to bed so early? The questions go on and on. Here are a few more.

- Why do they have Braille writing on the bank’s drive up cash machine?
- Why do banks charge a fee on insufficient funds when they know that the money is not there in the first place?
- Why does Superman stop bullets with his chest, but ducks when you throw a revolver at him?
- How come you never hear father-in-law jokes?
- Why do they use sterile needles for death by lethal injection?

The Scripture lesson for today is about questions. Questions and doubts and what ifs. Even the most faithful among us have them from time to time.

According to the Gospel of John, on the evening of the resurrection ten of the disciples of Jesus gathered behind closed and locked doors. Judas, for obvious reasons, was not there. Thomas, for reasons unexplained, was also absent the gathering.

We can only surmise what they were thinking and feeling. They were certainly afraid; the text makes that clear. Confused, lonely, depressed, desperate, disbelieving, lost: a thousand other emotions must have flooded their minds.

They had heard the story of Mary and her early morning visit to the tomb of Jesus. She came running to tell everyone that the stone had been rolled away from the grave and that he had risen from the dead.

Even though the news was good, they still huddled behind doors that were bolted against unwanted visitors. They didn't know if or when the same people who put Jesus to death would show up at their door. They were taking no chances.

The Disciples were facing their own "What If?" situation. What if this was all a dream? What if it had never happened? What if they were imagining things? What if all of this talk about Jesus being the Messiah was just so much talk? What if Jesus really couldn't be trusted?

Suddenly, right there in their midst stood Jesus. The locked and closed door had proven to be no barrier to him. "Peace to you" he said. Then he held out his hands for everyone to get a good look at the places where the nails had pierced them, just in case this further confirmation of his identity was needed.

For some reason, Thomas was not among them. We have no idea why. Maybe he was too grief-stricken to face his friends. Maybe he was cowering in fear in his own dark corner. Maybe he had been delayed. Maybe he had gone off somewhere to pray, meditate, and reflect on all that happened. We just don't know. We only know that he was missing.

Sometimes after Jesus left them, Thomas did indeed appear. They told him the news, that Jesus was alive. But Thomas the skeptic told them that he would believe only when he could see the nail prints, only when he could place his hand in the wound on his side. Only then would he believe.

So, skip ahead a week. They were gathered together once more. This time, Thomas was with them. Again, just like the week before, Jesus suddenly appeared before them. This time, he focused his attention on Thomas. Walking over to him and gazing into his eyes, he said, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

For some reason, the name "Doubting Thomas" has stuck. Poor Thomas. To have to go through history with that moniker attached to his memory is perhaps unfair. It may be time to rehabilitate his name somewhat.

You see, Thomas may have had a period of doubt, but don't we all have those periods from time to time? There isn't one of us here today who would like to be remembered for a time when we failed to live up to even our own standards, let alone the standards of God.

I would like to ask every one of you here today to remember a time when you did something stupid. Remember a time when you embarrassed yourself by committing some social faux pas. Remember when you have let down your spouse, failed to help a friend in time of need, said one thing but did another, or said an unkind word to or about

someone else. We've all done those things. Would you like your memory and reputation to be tied to one unfortunate incident?

But that is what has happened to Thomas. We remember him for his moment of doubt. We forget that Christian tradition tells of Thomas carrying the gospel all the way down to India. Even today, there exists an order of Christians known as the Christians of St. Thomas of India. This same tradition tells of his martyrdom for the faith.

In the eleventh chapter of John, Jesus received word that his friend Lazarus had died. He told the disciples that it was time to go to Bethany to offer comfort to the grief-stricken family. The disciples thought he was crazy. Why would he insist on traveling that close to Jerusalem when there was so much hostility there toward him? This would be about the same as if Al Sharpton would stop by a KKK meeting. But Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." We don't often talk about brave Thomas.

Later on, in John chapter fourteen, we find Jesus telling the disciples about the events that are about to happen regarding his death. Thomas is the one who speaks up because he doesn't have a clue what Jesus is talking about. He says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

What an incredibly honest answer. On occasion, my children will come and say, "Dad, I have a question." I will sometimes respond by saying, "OK, if I don't know the answer, I'll make one up." Thomas wasn't afraid to let it be known that he was confused.

When I was on the staff over at the Waynedale church, I remember saying something in an Administrative Council meeting about not understanding something. After the meeting, the senior pastor told me never to admit that I was confused about anything. Thomas didn't have that trouble. He admitted in front of all of his friends that he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. Still, we don't remember him as "Honest Thomas" do we?

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever had a time when your prayers seemed to bounce off of the ceiling? Have you ever had a moment in your life when, no matter how hard you tried or how hard you prayed, you just couldn't get a glimpse of God's presence? Have you ever wondered about God when you have witnessed some of the bad behavior of his children?

Let's be honest. When Thomas said that he wouldn't believe unless he was able to touch the nail prints in the hands of Jesus or put his own hand into the wound in his side, haven't we all done the same thing?

I sometimes wonder why God won't appear to me like he did Paul on the Damascus Road. I don't understand why the bush by the side of my garage door doesn't catch fire and burn with God's voice. Isn't it just as good as the bush that Moses saw? Gideon got his fleece rained on. God's never done that for me. John, the writer of Revelation, was

transported to the very portals of heaven. The highest off the ground that I've been is when I replaced a roof on a house in Baldwin, Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew.

Don't we all have our doubts? Don't we all wonder at times where God is? Don't we all have questions about the way the universe works? Aren't we all like Thomas from time to time?

In 2004, I picked up a book by Dr. Timothy Johnson titled, "Finding God in the Questions." At that time, Dr. Johnson, a seminary and medical school graduate, was medical editor for ABC News. I honestly am not sure if he is still with that network or not.

The sub-title for the book is "A Personal Journey." On the inside of the book jacket, he writes this.

Many of us are spiritually searching. We wonder if God is real, if religion is relevant, if faith is possible. We don't know what the answers are, and sometimes we don't even know what questions to ask.

Don't shy away from the questions...that's where God meets us – in the midst of honest grappling with heartfelt issues.

Thomas had his doubts. But we can learn some things about the attitude of Jesus to those with doubts. Notice what he doesn't do with Thomas. He doesn't ignore him. He doesn't try to shame him. He doesn't marginalize him. He doesn't try to punish him. He understood that Thomas had genuine questions, so he reached out to him, like he does to all of little faith.

Let me ask you to remember the incident in the eighth chapter of the gospel of Matthew. Jesus and the disciples are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee when a severe storm blew up. This small body of water experienced incredibly harsh storms from time to time. The wind would blow down from the north and in from the west and meet over the lake to produce violent storms.

One day, they were caught in such a storm, but Jesus stayed asleep in the back of the boat. They had to wake him up to tell him to do something because they are afraid of dying, but Jesus responds with, "O you of little faith. Why are you so afraid." But notice what happens next. Jesus reminded them that they had plenty of room to grow in their faith, but then came to their rescue. I am going to assume that, following this incident of demonstration of his power, the disciples' faith was increased. Just so, Jesus reacts to Thomas to help him increase his faith.

Thomas was wondering if all of the reports about the resurrection of Jesus could be true. He was having trouble believing that, but into the midst of his doubt came Jesus, to meet him at the place where faith and doubt meet.

There are those out there who will try to tell you that to have doubts is to reject your faith. They will try to tell you that if you have doubts, then you can't say that you have faith at all. Those who say those sorts of things are forgetting that we are finite human beings who don't know everything. We don't always know how things work. We can't and don't know the mind of God. We don't always understand the ways of the Kingdom.

I believe that God enjoys our questions and our doubts from time to time. That is where God can meet us in order to set us straight, to answer our questions, and to increase our faith.

I believe that doubting can in fact lead to greater faith, if we are willing to listen to the Holy Spirit and seek honest answers. Remember that it was only after Thomas took his doubt to Jesus that he was able to come to the place where he could proclaim, "My Lord and my God."

If you have questions about God, the message or Jesus, or life in the Spirit, don't be afraid of them. Don't be afraid to take them to God in prayer, because Jesus will meet us in our doubts and lead us to greater faith.