

Fearful or Faithful?

When I was a kid, my parents seldom locked the front and back doors of our home. Even at night. They didn't see any need to. Maybe it was the same way at your house, years ago. But today, most of us make a habit of locking our doors. We read the headlines. We watch the news. And we lock our doors.

Do you think we do that because the world has changed since we were children? Or is it because, in this day and time, enhanced technology keeps us informed twenty-four/seven about dangers that lurk? Whichever is it, ominous happenings in this twenty-first century world frighten us. We're fearful. We lock our doors.

And we're not the only ones. In the *first* century, in the evening of that first Easter day, followers of Jesus huddle behind closed doors. Behind *locked* doors. For fear of the Jews, we're told. Of course, the disciples themselves were Jews. And it's important that we understand: when the author of the Fourth Gospel refers to *the Jews*, he doesn't mean *all* Jews. He means

particular Jewish religious leaders in power in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus.

But up to this point, there haven't been any actual reports of the chief priests and Pharisees and scribes coming after Jesus' followers. Could the religious authorities be the *only* ones they fear?

You know, it's been said that fear and shame are kinfolk. Shame and fear are closely related. When we're ashamed of something we've done, it's in our nature to be fearful of the consequences. Isn't that how it is with those first disciples? Are they remembering the denials? The betrayals? Are they remembering how they abandoned Jesus, how they deserted Jesus at precisely the moment when his need of them was greatest?

Could their fear be of Jesus himself? What if he shows up to settle the score? He has reason to be angry with them.

And with us. *Will* Jesus be angry with us? We're aware of our sin-damaged human nature. We're aware of our own complicity in the suffering and death of Jesus. Do we—like his first followers—hide and cower in dread? Have we—perhaps—been taught that God is wrathful and will punish for all eternity?

If we do conceive of that kind of God, could it be that in fear we—at times—have tried to lock the risen Christ out of our lives? Or could we have locked ourselves *inside*—inside a prison we ourselves once constructed from uncertainty as to who he truly is?

Is uncertainty the same as doubt?

Today is often referred to as Doubting Thomas Sunday. That's what this day sometimes gets called. This day when—each year—we rēad the story of Thomas, on the second Sunday of Easter. Last Sunday was a high moment in our life together. We were joyful. We celebrated. We pulled out all the stops.

But this Sunday we hear about Thomas. Poor Thomas! For two thousand years, he's been branded as the one who had to have proof of the resurrection. For twenty centuries, Thomas has been viewed as some kind of second-class disciple.

But, my brothers and sisters, he's not. Not at all! You recall that, on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes from the empty tomb and from her encounter with Jesus himself, to proclaim the great good news of the resurrection to his other followers.

Clearly, they don't give her announcement much credence. They don't believe, they don't rejoice until with their own eyes

they *see* Jesus, risen and living. Until their eyes see his wounds. In needing to see with his own eyes, Thomas is no different from any of the others.

So it's not entirely accurate to label Thomas a doubter. Actually, the word "doubt" isn't even *in* the original Greek text of this story.

But this Sunday's gospel reading does pose a question for us to consider. And it's this: *How do fearful disciples—past and present—come to faith in Christ?*

How do we get there? The First Letter of John reminds us of the faithfulness of Christ. He is the One we strive to imitate. Your goal and mine is to grow into his likeness. To be faithful as he is faithful.

But I think there are times when every Christian—yes, *every* Christian—struggles with a lack of faith, a faith that seems inadequate. I think that the cry of the person who pleads with Jesus: *I believe; help my unbelief!* is the cry of every one of us. Are any of us born with a faith that's whole and strong, mature and fully developed? Was Thomas?

We can identify with Thomas. Remember how, in the gospel, he's called "the Twin"? Thomas has a twin sibling. But

we're never told the name of his twin. And we're never told if Thomas's twin is a brother or a sister. Do you think that maybe the reason the evangelist doesn't provide this information is that he hopes you'll wonder if Thomas's twin could be you?

Could *you* be a twin of Thomas? Could I?

Any one of us could be a twin of Thomas. Because, like the faith of Thomas, your faith—and mine—is a work in progress. Our faith is not stagnant, but growing.

Maybe there was a time in your life when you wanted very much to believe; when you were reaching for faith, but it kept eluding you.

I think that's how it is with Thomas. Even though he *tells* his companions that unless he sees and touches, he won't believe, in the innermost places of his heart, he yearns for the faith that's theirs.

But when Jesus first comes to his disciples on that resurrection evening, Thomas isn't there. And because he isn't, Thomas spends seven days and seven nights wrestling with unbelief. When Thomas *does* come to faith, it's at a time when he's with other disciples.

Because faith is nurtured, faith is sustained, faith thrives in the fellowship of a believing community. Faith needs the right environment to grow in. It's difficult for faith to flourish in the midst of the world's swirling chaos.

But—thanks be to God!—Christ offers you the *opposite* of chaos. He offers you his peace. He offers you his forgiveness. He offers you his abundant grace. His gifts to you banish fear. His gifts to you make possible the rooting and grounding of faith, of a deep, abiding faith.

Thomas, too, receives this gift of faith. Thomas sees. He sees the One who bears the wounds of crucifixion, yet has been raised from the dead. Thomas is invited to touch those wounds. But we're not told whether he actually *does* touch. Maybe it doesn't matter whether he does or does not. Because Thomas sees the expression on Jesus' face. And he hears the tone of Jesus' voice.

I think the way we imagine that expression and that tone has everything to do with shaping our interpretation of this encounter between Thomas and Jesus. Who does not rebuke or scold Thomas, but speaks with gentleness, with tenderness.

Who, smiling, looks at Thomas with a look of love. Who gives Thomas exactly what he needs to believe.

And then Thomas makes the greatest confession of faith in John's Gospel or in *any* of the gospels.

Yet it's not Thomas, but Jesus who stands at the very center of this narrative we hear today. Jesus, who blesses even those of us who *didn't* see what Thomas saw a week after Easter Day. Jesus blesses those of us who are not among his first disciples. To every one of his followers who live after that first generation, Jesus makes a promise that is very full of comfort: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

Beloved, we have been blessed! Blessed by the words of Jesus in this Gospel whose author tells us why he wrote it. He states its purpose plainly: *These [things] are written [so] that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that [through] believing, you may have life in his name.*

Written so that you may believe! Faith is yours through God's word. Because God's Word is Jesus Christ. In the words of sacred scripture, Christ comes to you. In ways as unique as each of you, the risen One meets you where you are. The risen

One brings you exactly what you need. The risen One brings you what you need to believe.

Easter people, Christ is present to you today! The same life-giving Spirit he breathes into his first followers, he breathes into you. The very Spirit of Christ's presence! With the eyes of faith, see him. Let him touch you. Experience the goodness of him who unlocks the door of your heart and vanquishes your fear and comes to dwell in you, always and forever.

In him, resurrection faith is yours. In him, resurrection life is yours! Rejoice, believer, with a glad heart! And confess with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!"

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.