

## **Honest Uncertainty**

1 John 1: 1-2:2

John 20: 19-31

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### *1 John 1: 1-2:2*

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him.

### *John 20: 19-31*

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then 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 answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and

yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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Poor Thomas. Each time I read this Scripture verse my heart goes out to him, and perhaps yours does as well. He was a lesser known disciple among the likes of Peter, James, John, Matthew and Judas, yet he too shared the journey and the ministry of Jesus Christ. He was present for the healings, the feeding of the crowds, the teachings, and even the resurrection of Lazarus. He was present at the Last Supper, and scattered later that evening as did the others. After the ascension of Christ he ministered in Persia and India, and he was martyred for his faith by being run through with a spear. But what he is remembered for are his pessimistic doubts, an inability to believe by faith rather than by touch. Thomas—he is remembered as Doubting Thomas---as the two words go together so clearly that one might think that was his given name. Doubting Thomas.

We hear the phrase, ‘don’t be a doubting Thomas,’ as an encouragement and urging to believe by faith alone, to just accept what we cannot fully understand. To doubt is considered believing that for God not all things are possible. We freely use the term for anyone who is a skeptic, who refuses to believe without direct personal experience.

Honestly though, Thomas gets a raw deal in all of this. His reputation is unfair, undeserved, and forgets how his doubts became both a strong, courageous faith and that he was the first to praise Jesus after his resurrection. Thomas was the first disciple to recognize Jesus as Lord and God after the resurrection. That is not doubt, that is not denial, that is faith explored, understood and deepened.

His nickname and legacy gloss over the beginning of the story. The disciples, other than Thomas, were locked in a home hiding in fear. After all that had happened to Jesus they feared being recognized in public, and they needed to be together to even begin to think and process all that had taken place over the past few days, and especially after this morning when Mary Magdalene had found Peter to tell him that the tomb was empty, and that she had seen, had spoken to, Jesus. They had heard Jesus say many times that he would suffer and die and they never quite got it, never quite understood or accepted. Now it is a reality. Do they believe it now? Do they have doubts?

Jesus suddenly appeared to the gathered disciples as a locked door meant nothing to him. His greeting offered comfort, reassurance. “Peace be with you.” They must surely have been incredulous that their crucified and buried Teacher now stood with them, living, breathing, showing his wounds where the nails had impaled his arms and feet, and where the sword had pierced his side. The rejoicing disciples saw his wounds, and heard his voice that not only offered them peace, but a commissioning for the next chapter of their ministry in his name. Jesus, like God breathing life into the first human, breathed on the disciples.

We do not know where Thomas was, we simply know of his absence. Perhaps he had been the one courageous enough to go out for food for the others, or to wander around and eavesdrop on the gossip and the news of that incredible day. Perhaps he had his own grief, his own concerns, so had not joined them that Easter evening.

When Thomas later joined the other disciples, he spoke the words that became his legacy. “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.”

Thomas was asking to see what the others had already witnessed. He was demanding what had been offered to each of those present. He requested what they had all already experienced.

A week later Jesus peacefully offered his wounds 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.”

Jesus encouraged Thomas to believe rather than doubt only after he could see and touch, only after his fingertips touched the ragged edges of the wounds, only after he saw where the blade point had cut Jesus’ side. Jesus accepted Thomas’ need to go beyond hearsay, to see for himself, and in doing so he became the first person to acknowledge the resurrected Jesus as “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus affirmed and blessed those who believed without seeing, without touching, as it takes great and deep faith to do so, but he did not reprimand Thomas’ need, his searching and his seeking, as he freely offered to Thomas what he had offered to the others.

In his doubts, in his questions, in his honest uncertainty, Thomas was seeking to do just what Jesus had taught in the days before his crucifixion, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

Whether it is Thomas, or anyone of us, using our God-given mind to understand, deepen and explore our faith is honest, genuine and faithful. As Jamie Arpin-Ricci wrote in *Vulnerable Faith*, “While we should never throw around our doubt with rebellious defiance, neither should we view our genuine questions and uncertainties as liabilities. Sometimes allowing ourselves to question deeply held beliefs opens us up to discovering that we were, in fact, in error, offering us the opportunity for more faithful understanding. Other times we discover that our fears are unfounded, returning to our former beliefs without doubt, yet stronger for it.”

Thomas’s doubts were not a rebellious defiance nor a liability, but an honest uncertainty. From his questions came the discovery of a more faithful understanding, and a deeper strength for his own ministry.

There is an old hymn that tells us to ‘Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus.’ However, this trusting and obeying does not mean a blind acceptance but rather a wrestling for what can be understood, knowing and accepting that there will always be some mystery. We will have, and should have, genuine questions, frank doubts and honest uncertainties, as we live out a faith journey that loves the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. This is how we can stand with Thomas and say, “My Lord and my God!” This is how we can stand with Thomas to see and touch the ragged edges of Jesus’ wounds.

Yet the negative image of Doubting Thomas is so pervasive that we are reluctant, and perhaps even embarrassed, to acknowledge our doubts, to ask our questions. The reality though is that spiritual doubt has been a part of the Christian journey since Thomas and the other disciples witnessed Jesus ministry first hand. Doubt is embedded in our faith experience because we cannot fully understand God as Three but One, we cannot fully understand why things happen as they do or how there is a plan in which we each play a part, we cannot fully understand how Christ was crucified and resurrected yet so much still goes on unchanged in the world. Doubt is a part of our faith experience because human nature itself finds ideas about God, faith, life and death, love and hatred, disparity and injustice, so outside of what we can understand.

What doubts have you wrestled with in the past? Or even this very moment? When have you needed to touch the wounds of Christ?

I know that when horrific mass shootings and bombings of innocent people happen, I need to reach up and touch the marks on Jesus' head where the crown of thorns had been placed.

When Jesus words of welcoming the stranger, of feeding the hungry, of offering a drink to the thirsty are twisted into the exclusion of others, I need to trace my fingertips over the lash marks on Jesus' back.

When faith is used as a weapon, when the love of God is set into categories of my right and your wrong, I need to run my fingers over the jagged wounds where the nails had once penetrated Jesus' arms and feet.

When I wrestle with understanding certain Scriptures and expectations, when I carry painful burdens, I need to reach out my hand and touch Jesus' side where the sword had pierced him.

I need to touch, to feel, to see, the One Thomas was the first to call, "My Lord and my God!" I need this reassurance, this grace, this tenderness, this acceptance, even when there cannot be understanding or a quick fix.

These doubts, these honest uncertainties, are fertile ground for our faith to grow, to take root in new ways. May your doubts lead to discoveries, your honest uncertainty lead to deeper insights and questions to richer understanding. Amen.