

Easter 2C 2019, John 20:19-31, April 28, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

“Doubting Thomas.” We don’t really know when the apostle got this nickname. It’s not in the Bible, that’s for sure. But say the name, Doubting Thomas, and everybody knows who you’re talking about. He’s the missing apostle when Jesus makes his first appearance after the resurrection. He refuses to trust the testimony of his fellow apostles that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. He is skeptical of their word. He needs to see and feel for himself. Today, anyone called a “Doubting Thomas” is a skeptic who won’t believe without direct personal experience.

I’ve come to the conclusion that Doubting Thomas gets a bad rap. First of all, why should he be the only apostle with a nickname? Why don’t we call, for example, Peter “Denying Peter,” or Phillip “Conniving Phillip” since he tried to put himself first? Nicknames tend to stick and they’re very difficult to shake once they’re applied. I have an uncle, named Harold, after his father, but he’s always been known as “Bud.” That’s what I call him, Uncle Bud. He’s 93 years old and he’s still called “Bud.” So Thomas, the skeptical disciple, will always be known as Doubting Thomas, and I think that’s unfair.

I don’t have any hard evidence of this, but I think it’s a case where the persistence of the nickname even influenced the way our Bible was translated. Here’s what I mean. When Jesus makes his second appearance, and he invited Thomas to see and touch the wounds from his crucifixion, he says, “Do not doubt but believe.” Jesus seems to lay the foundation for the nickname Doubting Thomas when he commands him not to doubt but rather believe. Here’s the trouble. Jesus never actually uses the word “doubt.” A more accurate translation would go, “Cease to be unbelieving, but believe instead.” Now, you may wonder, isn’t being “unbelieving” the same as “doubt?” And I’m going to say, not really. There’s a great deal of difference.

First of all, there are times when Jesus does use the word “doubt.” When Peter tries to walk across the water towards Jesus he becomes fearful and starts to sink. After Jesus rescues Peter he says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” In that case, Jesus actually uses the word “doubt.” We should be calling Peter, “Doubting Peter.” It would be more accurate.

But more importantly is how the word “belief” is understood, especially in the Gospel of John. Throughout his book, John sees belief as a relationship, not as assent to a set of facts. Today we might look at the clouds in the sky and say, “I believe it’s going to rain today.” And your friend might respond, “I believe you may be right.” But this weakens and waters down John’s emphasis on the word “believe.” To believe in Jesus brings life, the fullness of life, eternal life. Belief in

Jesus, however, is not belief **about** Jesus. It's about being in a living relationship with the living Jesus.

When Thomas and the other disciples walked with Jesus during his ministry they were in relationship. They trusted him, gave them their hearts and put all their hope in him. When Jesus was crucified and died their relationship ended. Their hope and the trust in their hearts died with Jesus on the cross.

Unless Jesus lived beyond death. That's what was so hard for Thomas to fathom. Thomas once believed Jesus. But he wanted proof that Jesus was alive if he was going to give him his heart once again. For the living relationship with Jesus to be restored Thomas needed to hear and see with own ears and eyes what the rest of the disciples experienced. It's what was needed. Jesus appeared a second time, just to give that gift to Thomas. Grace upon grace.

We are not like Thomas and the other disciples. We did not encounter the man Jesus before his crucifixion and resurrection. We were not threatened with the loss of hope and the ending of a relationship with Jesus when he died. We encounter the living Jesus, the one who lives beyond the confines of death. We have come to believe in Jesus through the testimony of those who have gone before us. As John our gospel writer concludes, "These (words) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you have life in his name." We are graced with this living relationship with the living Jesus through the ones who had their relationship with Jesus restored. Our faith is built upon their faith. Just as those who come after us will have their faith built upon ours.

But more importantly, faith is that living, breathing relationship with Jesus who lives beyond the grave. Yes, we have their testimony. But we also have the experience of our own encounters with Jesus. We experience Jesus where he promises to be: among his faithful followers gathered in his name; where bread and wine are taken, blessed and shared in his name, where the peace he gives is shared in holy moments of reconciliation and love.

Thomas, this mis-named apostle, shows us that believing in Jesus is so much more than merely assenting to some facts someone tells you. Belief in Jesus is all about being in relationship with Jesus. A living, breathing relationship that brings life. It truly would be much better to call him "Believing Thomas" than "Doubting Thomas." Doubts are natural from time to time in our life of faith. We all have them. But they do not define us, nor should they ever become our nicknames. We are an Easter people, a resurrection people. Jesus lives and the relationship with have with him will never die. Amen.