

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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John 20:19-31

God Bless the Holdouts

One of the most wonderful things about being human is the ability to question. The human mind is an amazing creation. In addition to generating all the instructions for the bodily functions needed to keep us alive, the human brain is the seat of consciousness, the locus of thought and inquiry, imagination and creativity. So if, as scientists tell us, we have an average of 70,000 thoughts per day, there must be an organizing function at work, something to recognize patterns, sort incoming data, discern what is useful and what is not, and bring coherence to it all. That is what we call the mind, which can question and analyze, synthesize and take leaps to new ideas.

Educational standards these days value the work of the mind, beyond memorization and the learning of basic facts and skills. The Common Core Standards include what is called "critical thinking," and schools are expected to teach students not only to gather, but also to process and apply knowledge. Think about it— isn't this essential for 21st century living? To be able to evaluate, problem solve, hypothesize, reason, interpret, compare, and decide?

These are the activities of a scientific way of looking at the world. A world view which assumes that facts and data are the foundation, that processing the facts yields insights, and that applying the insights yields progress towards truth and the improvement of life on earth.

We are people of a scientific time and culture. We value those critical thinking skills that help us be responsible citizens, productive workers, and leaders in the world. In our current climate of false news and—dare I say it—alternative facts, I think we can all agree that critical thinking skills are essential!

Which is why most of us like Thomas the apostle. We get it. He's a critical thinker. He wants empirical evidence before he'll believe a story that contradicts everything he's ever experienced before. He's holding out—his peers may be saying they saw it, touched it, heard it, felt it—but he's the last one to review the evidence and he hasn't seen it yet. Just because it's something they all WANT to be true doesn't make it so.

Somewhere in the last few hundred years we got the notion that science and faith are opposed to one another. That followers of religion consider science a godless activity and scientists view religion as nothing more than superstition. It's time to apply some critical thinking to this false assumption. If scientists are godless, then how could theoretical physicist John Polkinghorne also be an Anglican priest? Polkinghorne has written and lectured extensively on how his lifelong search for truth includes science, but takes him beyond science in a spiral of inquiry "inwards towards a deeper engagement with the multidimensional character of reality." (quotation from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploring_Reality) More locally, up at the Museum of the Rockies you can see an exhibit of the world's largest-ever-found dinosaur skull, the Torosaurus which was excavated by Lutheran pastor Ken Olson in the 1990s. I've heard Olson say simply, "The discoveries of science enhance our wonder at creation. Science tells us more about the world God has made." (http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/world-s-largest-skull-on-display-at-museum-of-the/article_22c03dd3-a793-5ab1-8876-e74cfe79cf34.html) And then there's Albert Einstein, who called himself an agnostic, yet also said he was a "devoutly religious man," for he wrote, "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_and_philosophical_views_of_Albert_Einstein) It's far too simplistic to say that science and religion are on

opposite sides, that we must choose between the two. Thomas the apostle, Thomas the doubter, is the original example of someone who embodies both faith and reason. He is a model for our time.

So let's take a deeper look at Thomas' faith, and Thomas' reason.

First, his faith. He was, after all, one of the twelve whom all four gospels name. We don't know what he did and what he left behind when he chose to follow Jesus. But he took a leap of faith to be Jesus' disciple, to travel through the countryside learning and listening, observing Jesus' power to heal and teach. John tells us more about Thomas than any of the other gospel writers do. Thomas speaks up when Jesus tells them that he is going to Bethany, where their friend Lazarus is dying. Bethany is in Judea, near Jerusalem, and there's already been trouble for Jesus there, life-threatening trouble, so the disciples advise against it. But Thomas is the one who has courageous faith, and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (Jn 11:16)

Not long after, Thomas exhibits inquiring faith. In John's gospel, there is an extended conversation at the last supper. Among other things, Jesus tells his friends about his father's house, where there are many rooms, and that he is going to prepare a place for them. He speaks of the way he is going, and Thomas asks, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

There's no such thing as a bad question if it's offered in sincerity, and I believe Thomas was sincere in his inquiry. He did not understand; he wanted to understand, but understanding would not be possible until after the resurrection. None of the disciples understood Jesus' way at this juncture. No one would "get it" until after the resurrection.

And, John tells us, it so happened that Thomas wasn't there when the others saw Jesus on the night of the first Easter. The group was hiding out, holed up in a locked house. Mary Magdalene had testified to them that she had seen the Lord, but reason denied that possibility. And then, there he was. With nail wounds in his hands and spear wounds in his side, and witnesses all around the room.

It seems those other disciples weren't any more willing to believe that Jesus was risen than Thomas was. They just had a head start on seeing the evidence, witnessing it for themselves. When Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in his side, I will not believe," he wasn't asking for any more proof than the rest. It's just that resurrection is unreasonable, contradictory to all experience. Dead is dead, right? Maybe there's an explanation for walking on water, maybe there was some spiritual meaning in what people called the miracle of the loaves, maybe Lazarus wasn't really dead when he was laid in the tomb, he just had a really really slow heartbeat that sped up after a few days of rest. . . but resurrection? Jesus risen from the dead? Thomas and the other disciples are reasonable people. The world operates on reliable laws, replicable principles, and this story about resurrection-wishing doesn't make it so.

Yet even this most scientific, reasonable empiricist named Thomas became convinced. And rather than deny his eyes, his touch, his ears, he took a great leap of faith and understood what no one else had yet said aloud, "My Lord and my God!" My Lord. My God. This man whom history knows as the Doubting One leaps way over his companions to make a personal proclamation of faith. Faith and reason, reason and faith—they worked together in Thomas to make him a one-of-a-kind witness who testifies to us across the centuries.

My friends, Thomas helps us to see that our doubts, our questions, our desire for convincing evidence are not signs of weakness in our faith, but rather gifts of our God-given minds. At the same time, our spirituality and our willingness to trust that there is truth beyond what we can prove through

our senses and our rational minds are not signs of a weak mind, but rather an indication of wisdom which exceeds what is tangible and measurable. Thomas helps us understand that we humans are scientific and spiritual, critical thinkers who can be guided by faith, religious persons who use their brains to the fullest.

Indeed, God blessed Thomas when he was a holdout. He received the gift of deep faith and insight. God in Christ blessed the other disciples when they were holed up. They received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of forgiveness, and soon they would also receive the gift of courage to go into the world and tell what they had seen. God in Christ blesses us, too, whether we are holdouts or holed up. For though we do not place our fingers in his side, or see the wounds in his hand, we still can be witnesses to God's presence in the places where we hurt, and the places where we are given new life. We still receive the testimony of Thomas and Mary and all the other disciples, which has been transmitted from one generation to the next, so that we might also believe. And so it is us whom Jesus blesses when he says, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

So question, if you will. Doubt, if you need to. Hold out, if that is the most honest way for you to pursue truth. But be prepared for the sometimes startling entry of the risen Christ into our world, into our lives. For he meets us where we are, and welcomes us as we are, and makes us more than we are.

May the peace of Christ be with you.