

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

First Sunday after Easter

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[John 20:19-31](#)

A while back Christy approached me before choir practice and said that she was looking for someone to preach the sermon on the Sunday after Easter. I just smiled noncommittally and started to edge away slightly. She responded with that big Christy smile and said, “The Gospel text is the story of doubting Thomas — so naturally I thought of you!” It was hard to say “no” to that.

I’m not sure exactly what Christy was driving at, because I didn’t know much about the apostle Thomas. I knew that he doubted Jesus had been resurrected. I knew that he touched Jesus’ wounds to convince himself that it was true. That was about it.

But I did some research. Right off the bat I learned that I was wrong on both counts. Thomas didn’t doubt the resurrection, he flat out didn’t believe it. And he never touched Jesus’ wounds, in spite of what talented Dutch artists may have depicted. By the way, if you’ve studied the painting on the front of your bulletin closely, you may be under the impression that some of the disciples wore glasses. I have not been able to confirm this.

What Thomas did after the biblical doubting episode, at least according to tradition, is fascinating to me. Did you know that there are only three apostles who have churches built above their tombs? They are Peter, James, and Thomas. Peter has the Basilica in Rome and James has the famous pilgrimage destination in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. But how many of you know what modern country Thomas is buried in? I didn’t know either. According to tradition, Thomas traveled to India in the middle of the 1st century to proselytize. Thomas is buried beneath the San Thome Cathedral Basilica in Chennai, India. We used to call Chennai Madras. Thomas is now the patron saint of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. He is also the patron saint of builders because he built a Christian church in India with his own hands. He is also the patron saint of doubters (of course) and ... theologians. That’s something to think about.

What about this doubting business? Remember that Thomas had missed the memo that the other disciples were hiding out in a locked house for protection. When they told him that he had also missed seeing Jesus, he says that unless he can touch Jesus' wounds, "I will not believe." That's pretty emphatic. He doesn't say, "Aww, I have my doubts about that." It's Jesus himself who uses the word doubt. According to the New Revised Standard Version translation in our pew bibles, Jesus admonishes Thomas: "Do not doubt but believe."

One of the study bibles I looked at had the rather snide footnote that the word Jesus actually used is unbelief "... not 'doubt' as the Greek word is always wrongly translated." But the editor who wrote that footnote was a little lazy. Some translations do get it right. The good old King James Version has: "Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." The Common English Bible, that I often use when asked to read scripture, has: "Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

Does it matter whether Thomas was "faithless, disbelieving Thomas," or merely "doubting Thomas"? It can.

For our modern Christian sensibilities, doubt isn't so bad. Thomas is just like us. Who wouldn't have doubts? He's a seeker, a questioner. That's a good thing, right? We're supposed to ask the hard questions; we're supposed to search for the big answers.

I have belonged to more than one church, and maybe I belong to one now, where one of the mottoes is: "No matter where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here."

"Got some doubts? Just part of the journey, my friend. (And if you want to know the truth, some of my doubts are real doozies.) So come on in, bring your doubts, your journey with us will be meaningful and fulfilling. Now let me explain how to fill out a pledge card."

That last, of course, doesn't apply to West Denmark. Here it would be something like, "Now, let me show you this large table with sign-up sheets on it."

But today's Gospel text has been really important to Christians for 2,000 years. We may have modern sensibilities, but that sign out on the lawn, no matter how often I change the movable letters, always has the word "Lutheran" in the permanent lettering on top. So I thought I'd better look into Martin Luther's ideas about this story. Was it important to his theology? What would he think of approaching Thomas and his doubts in terms of our modern sensibilities?

The answer to the second question is, he's probably turning over in his grave. And the first question — Was it important to him? — is like asking, "Is ice cream important to Ben and Jerry?" There was no doubt (pun intended) in Luther's mind that Thomas's problem was unbelief, not doubt. But in terms of his overall theology, doubt was a very important concept.

But we're not talking about wishy-washy, modern sensibility "doubt." For Luther, doubt was one aspect of a big battle in the human soul— the *Anfechtung*, a mixture of doubt, despair, and existential dread that together constituted a spiritual attack going on in every person. The root of the word *Anfechtung* is *fecht*— fight. The devil is fighting for your soul with the weapons of despair and doubt. But, for Luther, having all that seething within you is not the opposite of faith, it is the crucible in which faith is forged. Doubt, first of all, is normal; it's not condemned, it's expected. Faith is not a steady emotional state, but a continual returning to God's promise of salvation. All of that sounds pretty modern. But for Luther, doubt was a sign that God was letting the devil do the work of stripping away your self-reliance, driving you to Christ and salvation. He said, "When you feel doubt, run to the promises of God, not to your own feelings." You mean, we can't rely on our feelings? Martin seems not so modern now.

If doubt is in many ways a good and necessary thing, what about outright disbelief? The word Luther would use was *Unglaube*. Disbelief or unbelief for Luther was rejecting God's promise and trusting in oneself instead. Unfortunately, unbelief was humanity's natural state after that regrettable incident in the Garden of Eden. It's not an intellectual decision, but a natural turning inward. You can't heal it by argument or reason, but only by experiencing the Gospel. Hearing the Word can create faith in a human being where there was none.

So what about poor old Thomas? Luther was very clear on one point— he was not just a doubting Thomas, he was very definitely an unbelieving Thomas. He had definitely crossed the line. And this might be considered especially disconcerting because Thomas was basically an admirable guy. He was courageous and loyal. When Jesus wanted to go back to Judea, the other disciples argued that he would be in physical danger from the authorities. But Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He also had every reason to be a believer after witnessing Jesus' miracles, including Lazarus's resurrection. Yet even such a disciple collapsed into unbelief after the crucifixion.

Even then, Thomas had every opportunity to believe. He had the evidence of the women who reported from the empty tomb, he had the evidence of the other disciples who had seen the risen Jesus, he had evidence from the Scriptures, and he had the evidence of Christ's own predictions. But he chose to disbelieve.

And then Christ rescues him. In other words, the story of Thomas coming to belief from unbelief is an excellent summary of Luther's big theological point. Our faith is God's work, not something achieved through human effort.

Luther loves the Thomas story because it shows Christ's patience and mercy toward the unbelieving heart. According to Luther, Jesus didn't mysteriously appear a second time in the disciples' safe house and then happen to notice that Thomas had showed up too. Luther says that Jesus returns specifically to save Thomas. He knows that Thomas had said he wouldn't believe unless he touched the wounds. Jesus says, "All right, here I am. I'm not rejecting you. Touch me, look at my hands, put your own hand in my side."

But here's where the Dutch artist got it wrong. Thomas does not do what he said he had to do when he was talking big to the other disciples. He never touches Jesus. He immediately shouts out the words that many think of as the climax of the Gospel of John: "My Lord and my God!" In fact, some argue that the whole arc of John's Gospel narrative leads to Thomas's acclamation of Jesus as the Deity. Remember that John differs in many ways from the other three Gospels, the so-called synoptic Gospels. One of the differences is that John's is the only Gospel that identifies Jesus as fully divine.

Martin Luther saw the story of Thomas as a comforting one for troubled Christians. Even the strongest and the best can stumble into unbelief. But Jesus will be there to comfort, forgive, and take you back. The story of Thomas is not a cautionary tale; Luther is not warning us, "Don't be like Thomas, ignoring all the facts that might support your faith. No," he says. "You are Thomas— every Christian is Thomas— struggling to believe God's promises. And Christ will always be there to comfort you in that struggle and, ultimately, save you from that struggle. Where Luther got it a bit wrong was in the conclusion of the story. Luther wanted the story to illustrate that the power that pulls a Christian away from his *Anfechtung*, that fierce inner struggle, is hearing the Word of God, hearing the story of Christ crucified and risen. This is Luther's theology of the cross. So for Luther the important thing was that Thomas did not have to touch Jesus to believe, he only had to hear him.

But hearing and touch aren't the human senses that Jesus cites in the story. "Have you believed because you have seen me," asks Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

It's generally believed that John was the last Gospel written. It ultimately had several authors and editors, and their audience consisted of Christians in Ephesus in what is now Turkey. They were the grandchildren of the first Christian converts and, of course, had never seen Jesus, and most had probably never seen the places where the Jesus story takes place. John assures them in the story of Thomas that they are just as blessed as the original disciples because they can believe without seeing. And that message resonates with Christians today, far removed in time and place from Ephesians living in the year 90.

There are, of course, Christian perspectives other than Luther's about the underlying themes of doubt and unbelief. Many of you have found your way here from other faith traditions. And I know from conversations and sermons and shared meditations that your present beliefs are all over the place. I talked about the faith journey. If I were able to map the faith journeys of everybody I'm looking at right now, what I'd wind up with would not look like a well-planned freeway system. It would look more like a skein of yarn after our dog Hansi got through with it. And I think that's just great! What a wonderful place this is! What a wonderful, diverse community this is. Sometimes I think that the only thing we have in common is that we're all really, really smart.

But we should acknowledge that the people who founded this congregation were more

homogeneous in their beliefs and theology. And it is at least interesting to consider what their perspective might have been on the questions of doubt and unbelief. Which brings us to that acronym you see on so many bracelets the kids are wearing: WWGD— What Would Grundtvig Do? Or, more precisely in this case, What Would Grundtvig Say ... about doubt?

I did some research on this, and based on that and my own little bit of background, I think he would have said, “Oh, don’t worry about it. Thomas ran into trouble because he didn’t go to church. Why wasn’t he there that first time Jesus appeared to the disciples? He was part of a community of believers, but then he chose to separate himself. Jesus brought him back.”

For Grundtvig, doubt is unnecessary, and it’s also spiritually unhealthy. So ... you’d be better off avoiding it. Just come to church, be sure to enjoy the miracle of flowers and trees as you go in, recite the Apostle’s Creed together, appreciate that you’re part of a continuing Christian community, drink some coffee, be happy.

So now I’ve given you two ways to find comfort in the story of doubting Thomas. You can follow Luther and embrace your doubt and guilt, knowing that they are a necessary part of that *Anfechtung*— that ongoing internal fight that forces you to salvation. Or you can follow the Happy Danes who founded this place, and forget your doubt in the fulfilling joy of Christian fellowship.

I’ll leave you with this. And I’m sure Christy had this in mind when she asked me to preach. There is no doubt that you will rid yourself of a lot of guilt if you visit that big table with the sign-up sheets before you leave today. Amen.