

Reach out your hand
John 20:24-31

Have you ever missed a really big event? I imagine all of us can recall a time when we had missed something significant in the life of our family, our church, our community somewhere along the way. Probably there is something we all wish we could go back and experience that we missed.

The past year has been like that almost every day. We have missed holiday gathering, birthdays, new births, graduations, the comfort of funeral services and wakes. And that has not been the fault of any of us, but still we have been without that presence. Maybe we have seen some pictures on our phone, or had some fun on Zoom, but we were not there.

I thought of this when I read the account in John 20 once again of that very human disciple of Jesus named Thomas. Whew, you talk about missing a big event - he missed the post resurrection appearance of Jesus the Christ.

He missed it. No explanation was offered, he just wasn't there. Maybe it was something important. Maybe it was fear. Maybe it was just happenstance. But Thomas was not with the others when Jesus came to them.

If we think about Thomas, we often rush to judgment. He has been labeled for all time as the doubter. Who knows where he was? The last he knew, Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. We know from our modern psychological studies, that grief hits each of us in a different way, but there are identifiable stages. Perhaps Thomas needed to be alone in his shock and anger. The scriptures don't tell us.

But the passage implies strongly that his friends sought him out. They found him, and said to him the

incredible unbelievable news. "Thomas we have seen the Lord!" They told him about how ecstatic it was and how he had missed it.

Probably the more they talked, the worse he felt. But the good news is he gets a second chance.

I think Thomas through his experience of missing the moment, then later experiencing the moment can teach us valuable spiritual lessons.

We recognize that Thomas is known forever as a doubter. That is not a compliment. We use that term for someone who is raising concerns, or throwing cold water on our ideas. It is a negative term. "The Doubting Thomas"

Yet we can learn from him.

1 Integrity is an important part of faith.

There are no bad questions if asked with integrity and honesty. Thomas, as we see elsewhere in the Gospels had a kind of honesty, even credibility, because he wasn't just going to say he believed to go along with the crowd. He may have been a skeptic, but he was honest with himself and others.

I always had respect for those who are seeking answers and admit they have questions. In fact, the best definition of theology and really the most simple one is "Faith seeking understanding". We begin from a foundation of faith, but say, "what about this thing over here that I don't understand?"

Faith seeking understanding says that we have the integrity to be honest with ourselves and others, and it also says that God in Christ is strong enough to deal with our questions or doubts.

It is a part of faith. It is a part of life in every relationship we have, so also with God.

I can imagine that Thomas saw the faith of his friends. But he needed to ask, "Is the Jesus I know the same Christ of the Scriptures?"

It is a critical question. It goes back to the question that Jesus posed to Peter and others when he said "Who do you say that I am?"

Isn't it curious that the gospel writer John chose to include this story? How relevant integrity and honesty are even today? Even how essential they are.

In today's culture of disinformation, misinformation, intentionally misleading information, and weird conspiracy theories, we need to be able to show integrity in our interactions, but especially in faith, to ask questions and know that God is big enough for it.

(As I have learned elsewhere, the opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is fear. Being afraid to challenge yourself and others.)

2 God takes our doubts seriously.

In the Children's letters to God, young Arnold writes, "Dear God, its ok that you made different religions, but don't you get mixed up sometimes?"

A church, any church or denomination can sometimes treat faith like a factory line, with the aim to produce believers who all say and believe the same thing. But we know from experience that everyone is unique and comes to faith in a different way.

So as we have seen, Thomas was honest enough to raise his doubts about what had happened, and even boldly say "Unless I put my fingers in the nail prints, I won't believe." God took this seriously.

Thomas was not rejected and exiled for his initial doubts. When Jesus appeared once again to the disciples, the first words he spoke to Thomas were, "reach out your hand."

Put your hands in my side. God did that for Thomas. What might God through Christ do for us? It was his unique journey, his questioning.

If you have a need for understanding reach out your hand.

If you have questions, reach out your hand.

If you are in need of comfort and reassurance, reach out your hand.

Reach out your hand.

And we see what happened to Thomas when he could be honest with God? It seems as though he never did touch those nail prints, rather he simply exclaimed "My Lord and My God!"

One of the great faith statements in the Gospels.

Do you know it is rare even in the Gospels for Jesus to be addressed as God by anyone?

Thomas had an amazing faith experience emerge from his questions. This is our journey as well. We study, we question, we learn, but we are all on a path guided by God to understanding.

3 We work through our doubts by being part of a community of faith. Even though Thomas is missing initially from the story, by verse 26 he is back in the community of faith, ie the church.

Being part of a community of faith is how we journey with God, how we grow, and how we seek understanding.

I think it is so instructive that when Thomas made his bold pronouncement about "seeing the nail prints", the others did not throw him out - rather they kept close to him, and in that fellowship he emerged with an experience of faith.

The reason I bring that up is over the years, some have said, "well I stay away from church because I am not sure I believe everything that is in the Bible, or I object to some theological statement.

We work through our doubts by being part of a community of faith. It is a lifelong journey.

Do you remember the movie "Parenthood"? It is a great comedy, where Jason Robards plays a grandfather in a small town. Steve Martin plays his son, who has two small children who are constantly causing him stress and heartache, and he opens up to his father to ask when will all of this end?

Jason Robards character says, "When you kids went off to college your mother and I thought we had finished the job. We are still waiting to cross the goal line and do the touchdown dance. The truth is your job as parent is never finished. You just learn to work through it as a family"

Some people experience a faith journey like that. You never think, "Well now I have arrived, I have all the answers I can spike the ball - your journey is as long as you live. But you go together with a community of

faith, you seek understanding, you grow, you ask, you question, even doubt sometimes,

It is part of the dialogue of faith. It is in the mystery that we sometimes find the way forward.

So take the invitation of Jesus seriously. Reach out your hand. Ask, seek, knock.

And also, in the community of faith is where we meet the risen Christ. That's an experience that God doesn't want anyone to miss. Not even us!

Thanks be to God. Amen.