

Primary Reading: John 20:19-31

Thomas is a character in the bible that we've learned to love to criticize. We ridicule him with the given name, "Doubting Thomas." He's become a symbol of those who ask difficult questions about the resurrection of Jesus – those who "doubt," those who try to reconcile the modern questions of the scientific method with the timeless questions of faith, to put it simply, those who are "skeptical" – who "doubt" – that a body which hung on a cross and was three-days-dead could breathe again.

I don't know about you, but I often think of the resurrected Jesus as some ghost in an episode of Scooby-Doo. Walking through locked doors, appearing and vanishing mysteriously. But when we read closely, this isn't what the Gospels (especially John's Gospel) tell us at all.

We're told instead that the body of Christ, Jesus' very body, *breathes on them* and says to them (just as we do each Sunday morning) "Peace be with you" even showing them his hands and his side. I wonder, if this alone might give us pause for reflection this morning as we offer hand to one another and repeat the words "peace be with you."

But I digress a little, from this Jesus who was no ghost. This body of Christ that breathes, who invites his followers to touch the wounds in hands and side, and even (a chapter later in the Gospel of John) a body that eats fish for breakfast. No Scooby-Doo ghost indeed!

And Thomas, we're told, "doubts" that this Jesus is alive. And for this, *I kind of appreciate Thomas*. Not because he's an example, but because his faith, his belief, his skepticism, his *doubt* is real. His "doubt" we might say is just as tangible as the wounds he eventually touches in the body of Christ.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt Thomas really only asks to see, to be given, exactly what the other disciples had seen and had been given. And so, I like this Thomas, partly because, as Pastor Dave noted last week – he along with everyone else in the bible save for one ambiguous example –

doesn't believe until he sees the risen body of Christ. I must admit that I too have a difficult time believing... that is to say, my lack of faith hinges on being able to see the risen body of Christ. And I'm not usually very good at discerning the risen body of Christ in my midst.

You know, one part of "belief" or "faith" which many struggle with in our world today can be found on page four of the bulletin today. It's the creed.

Both the shorter and probably more familiar Apostles' Creed and the longer Nicene Creed which we'll say this morning, begin with the simple word "*Credo*" (in Latin); "I" or "We believe" (in English).

I don't know if it's true for you, but these creeds are statements which seem very odd to many of us who consider ourselves "modern." These statements of belief – especially when we study the history of how they were developed – might lead us *away from* rather than towards affirming a belief in a resurrected Christ. To be honest, this was certainly the case for me, as I studied the history of the creeds in college. They seemed to me to mixed up in human conflicts and politics to have anything to do with faith.

You see, you thought the political season was warming up this spring in the United States... Well, the backdrop for the writing of the Nicene Creed, in some ways, makes our political debates look like a couple of two year olds having a meaningless fight over a pithy toy.

The city was Nicea (in modern day Turkey) and the year was 325. Around three hundred bishops gathered to settle a controversy which had erupted, threatening to tear apart the very fabric of the Christian church. The product that came from the gathering was the Nicene Creed.

The conflict was basically between a priest named Arius and a bishop by the name of Alexandrius. And the conflict was sort of like a bookend to what our "doubting Thomas" struggled with.

You see, Thomas said he refused to believe that Jesus existed – that the body of Christ was alive – *after his crucifixion and death*. On the other end of the bookend were Arius & Alexandrius... And Arius and his supporters refused to believe Jesus existed *before he was even born* (the Arian motto became, "there was when He was not"). But on the other side,

Alexandrius and his supporters, affirmed that if Jesus was one with God, and there was only one God, then Jesus *did exist even before he was born*.

I know what you're thinking – that is, those of you who haven't fallen asleep or drifted away to thoughts of an afternoon nap. You're thinking, *it sounds to me like another boring theological discussion with little relevance for me or the church today*. Maybe you're right...

But at the time, historians tell us you couldn't walk to the store and buy a loaf of bread without getting into an argument over whether or not there was a time when "He was not." In fact, riots erupted over this very issue. In fact, wars were fought and lives were ended over what would follow that simple statement, "Credo..." (in Latin); "We believe..." (in English). Why would we affirm something that grew out of a conflict so mixed up with human politics and woundedness?

You might think about this when we join with other Christians across space and time, speaking the creed together today: "We believe in one God," we will say. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father."

And you might notice the mysterious affirmation of this creed – that not only did Jesus exist after he was hung on a cross and died, but the body of Christ – wounded as it was for the healing of our lives, existed *before it was born*. It's an affirmation of faith that's not easy to reconcile with our modern minds saturated as we've been in the scientific method.

And for this reason, this practice of affirming our faith by *speaking the Nicene Creed*, might cause us to squirm in our seats. Why would we recite a statement written by a bunch of people who are long dead for a church conflict that is now long dead, but literally at the time left many dead? Shouldn't we update it a bit? Shouldn't we make it "more modern"?

Maybe it's a little like the question that we might join with Thomas in asking, *How can we believe in a risen body of Christ unless we put our finger on the mark of the nails and our hand in his side?*

Good questions to ask. And good questions, especially one's that root us deeply into the mysteries of the faith, rarely come with easy answers.

Perhaps creeds, affirmations of faith – particularly a creed like the Nicene Creed written as it was over fifteen centuries ago – binds us in a way to the wounded Body of Christ, across space and across time.

Across space, we join in a way with Christians of all stripes and colors, from Russian Orthodox Christians in Moscow to the Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope in Nicaragua we join in affirming that God is alive, has always existed, and will always go on being active in the world.

And across time, we join in a way in affirming the same creeds as our spiritual parents and grandparents like Martin Luther or Hildegard of Bingen, Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr... the same creed that we speak today and that was spoken by my parents and grandparents over the waters in which I was baptized... the same creed that will be spoken in a few weeks over the waters in which our son Elijah will be baptized...

Of course, you still have to decide if the creed is useful or not. Does it ‘hold water’ for you, so to speak? Does it help move you closer to affirming that God is alive in the world in which you live?

My mother promised to give Elisabeth and Elijah and I a rocking chair someday. The chair was given to her by her parents, from their parents, and going back several generations. The rocking chair was brought across this country by my ancestors’ wagons, first generation immigrants. I don’t think the chair would go for a lot of money on *Antique Road Show* since my mother replaced the hand-woven seat of the rocking chair, long worn-out from use. Still even though I don’t yet possess it, it’s already precious.

Perhaps the creeds like all traditions of the faith are a bit like treasured heirlooms. We must look carefully at the framework that’s been handed down to us. But it might sometimes be appropriate to ask questions of skepticism – even doubt – in order to make sure our traditions are still ‘holding weight.’

It’s a delicate balancing act. But in the end, just as it was for Thomas, the risen but still wounded ‘Body of Christ’ appears not in spite of but in the very midst of our fears, our anxieties, our questions, and especially our doubts. We needn’t pretend that our history as Christians is without wounds. We need only root ourselves more deeply in the mystery of the wounds which God works through – bringing healing and new life. Amen.