

Charleen Jongejan Harder  
Valleyview Mennonite Church  
Sunday September 3, 2017  
Series: Cloud of Witnesses/Clay Feet

**Focus Statement:** The disciple Thomas is often maligned as "doubting Thomas" but is this a fair judgement of the disciple? A reading of the gospel shows a loyal disciple, who asks questions for clarification, and needs concrete evidence to believe. What place do questions and doubts have in a life of faith? In our ongoing series: Cloud of Witnesses / Feet of Clay, we explore the contribution of Thomas to the Christian community. In this service I would like to explore the paradox of doubt and faith, questions and answers, certainty and ambiguity; and how Thomas helps us navigate the faith journey.

### **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed**

When I was a young adult, just leaving college and in my first few years of sorting out this whole adult life thing (adulthood, this is called now, a brilliant verb-ing of a noun) - I struggled quite a bit with the concept of faith and doubt. I carried with me an inner sense that doubt was bad, it meant that my faith was not strong enough, that my faith had holes in it. I was seeking a faith without holes, a faith that was SOLID, SURE and CERTAIN. I'm pretty sure this is a modern aspiration.

And despite that desire for certainty - perhaps because of it - I had many questions. I had many uncertainties. I had many doubts about what I was taught, how I understood the whole Christian faith, how it all held together. And those doubts loomed large.

For a while they caused me to wonder if I truly could call myself a Christian. Because I didn't know everything *for sure*. Then I got a bit defensive. And started having more certainty in my doubts than my assurances. I knew what I didn't know, and I didn't know what I knew. *{If that makes any sense?}*. What could I depend on? Because my focus was on those holes, those doubts.

And I looked for assurance that there was room in the life of faith for doubts. And I found it here and there and clung to it: a sermon here, a conversation there, a song, a book, a poem. Somewhere in this season of my life, I was gifted this quotation from German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

This quotation shifted the whole process for me. In time, I came to integrate those questions, and claim my assurances one by one. I began with “I am held”, because I had had a spiritual experience of the presence of God with me at a time of suffering. I expanded that to “I am held by God”. And soon, my confidence in God being a God of love allowed me to state with confidence, the kernel of my confession of faith to this day: “I am held by God who loves me”. From this confession of faith, I began to re-build my sense of faith and life: Because I am rooted and grounded in love, I follow Jesus, who was sent by God, and who calls us to love God and love our neighbour.

Did my questions suddenly disappear? No. Did my doubts resolve themselves? No. But over time, their priority in my life of faith has shifted dramatically. I do not get anxious about a question or doubt. I get curious perhaps. Wondering. I have integrated many questions - I know that I can live a life of faith - a faithful life - in the midst of many questions. I do not expect certainty any more. To quote the poet Tennyson, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” I am confident now, that any vibrant life of faith has a tonne of questions. In fact, I believe that having questions is a vital part of engaging one’s faith. Being curious, wondering, questioning - this is part of being faithful.

In fact, certainty as an absolute, is somewhat disturbing to me, turning faith into belief in a system of black-and-white, inflexible, impenetrable, unchangeable set of doctrines swallowed whole. The old philosopher Voltaire is quoted as saying: “Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.” This kind of “Certain” faith does not have the ability to address changing times, I fear, and folks who require certainty live in fear of the whole house of cards falling down. It is a clinging to certainty that compels people to violence on behalf of their beliefs, and which is threatened by any whiff of change.

Paul Tillich, a philosopher and theologian wrote extensively on faith and doubt, and concludes: “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.” Contemporary author Annie Lamott draws from the work of theologian Paul Tillich when she writes: “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns. Faith also means reaching deeply within, for the sense one was born with, the sense, for example, to go for a walk.”

The character whom we are examining today has for centuries been labelled as Doubting Thomas. He was defined by his questions - by his doubt. He is presented as a warning - don’t be a doubting Thomas. As you can probably guess, I think that’s an unfair and unhelpful characterization. For one, which disciple would we hold up for contrast? Peter, the rock? Who abandoned Jesus at his time of greatest need and said “I do not know the man...” Or John, who failed to stay awake? Or James or Andrew who were trying to figure out “who was the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?” All the disciples have clay feet, and so do we. God called them that way; God called us that way; and if there is a way to walk this road of faith, it’s going to be with our clay feet.

Thomas, as a disciple, is not just clay feet however. He is more than his doubt, although he is characterized by his questions. He has two other appearances in the gospel beyond his being called by Jesus. The first is in John 11, connected with the story of Lazarus. Jesus delays going, and the disciples are frightened to go because it is close to Jerusalem, where their lives are in danger. Thomas speaks up, "Let us also go, and die with him." This is the voice of a passionately loyal realist - knowing that following Jesus means likely death for all - he stands by Jesus. This is impressive! Loyal Thomas stands by his man, offers support to the risk of his own line.

The second is from John 14. There, Jesus had just explained that he was going away to prepare a heavenly home for his followers, and that one day they would join him there. Thomas reacted by saying, *Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?* (NIV) A grounded question of clarification. He dared to ask the question that I have no doubt many others in that circle were thinking. "Jesus, what you're saying doesn't make any sense! Can you clarify for us?" Can you imagine a classroom discussion without people willing to ask questions? Teachers - would that not be awful? Questions demonstrate engagement with the topic, curiosity, and a commitment to giving the speaker a chance to demonstrate further knowledge. As a teacher and preacher, I know I value those who ask questions. Furthermore, 1st century Jewish teaching was built on a foundation of Q and A. The teacher spoke, the students questioned. If the students didn't ask good enough questions, the teacher would give them questions to ask, and chide them for not asking the questions. There is no evidence that this question is rebuked - rather it provides an opportunity for Jesus to make a bold claim: "I am the way, the truth and the life." As a gospel reader, I'm grateful for Thomas' questions, for his realism. And I know questions have an essential place in a life of place.

Then we come to the text in question today, from John 20, where Thomas is chided by the risen Jesus: "Stop doubting and believe". This statement from Jesus is the reason he is labelled as Doubting Thomas. As we weigh in on that label, let's examine the context of this story, and what this statement entails both for Thomas, for the early believers and for us; and how it fits into the gospel as a whole. At the beginning of this story, it is the evening of the first day of the week, and the disciples are gathered behind closed doors because they fear for their lives. The day before yesterday their world had fallen apart - Jesus had been crucified. They had seen their beloved master nailed through his hands to the cross. They had seen the soldier put his spear in Jesus side so that water and blood spilled out. They knew, without any shadow of a doubt that he was dead. And they were afraid. Into that context of fear and uncertainty, Jesus came and stood among them. And said "Peace be with you". Then he showed them his hands and his side and said again "Peace be with you." There is no indication that he was asked to show his hands and side - then again, there's no indication that there was not. The key is that the wounds on his hands and side were the proof the disciples craved; Jesus was recognized by his wounds. The disciples were overjoyed.

But Thomas was not there. We don't know where he was - but he wasn't there on that Sunday evening. So the other disciples came to him and say "We have seen the Lord!" Ostensibly they tell him the rest of the story - how they saw the marks of the nails in Jesus hands, and how they were able to put their hands into the wound in Jesus side. But Thomas resists believing. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my fingers in them - and unless I reach out and put my hands into the wound in his side - I will not believe."

Thomas is not asking for something special. At this point, he wants the same experience that the disciples had. He wants Jesus to do for him what he did for them. He wants equal treatment. And he gets it. The next Sunday, they are all gathered in a similar way - behind locked doors - and Jesus comes and stands among them. Thomas is with them this time. And Jesus says to everyone once again: "Peace be with you". And he turns to Thomas and shows him his hands and side, and invites him to touch. Thomas is invited into the experience.

And from that experience, he gives the most profound statement of faith in the entire gospel: his confession: "**My Lord and My God!**" Did you notice that? Thomas gives voice to the climax of faith in the whole gospel. If there is one central assertion of the gospel, this is it - that Jesus is worthy of that claim: My Lord and My God! Thomas, doubting Thomas, gives voice to the strongest statement of faith in the gospel. Now, one could assert he is BELIEVING Thomas, or FAITHFUL THOMAS. Let that sink in a moment.

And indeed, the evidence is that Thomas remained faithful to the end. As the disciples dispersed after Pentecost, tradition Thomas' portion was the far East. And tradition holds that he journeyed as far as India with the gospel message. And to this day there are Christians in Kerala province who assert that their community was launched by the apostle Thomas. They are the Mar Thoma Nazranis, or the Saint Thomas Christians.

But the gospel writer has another audience - and another purpose - than affirming Thomas. The gospels are written with the express purpose of drawing listeners into a relationship with the living Jesus - drawing listeners to a confession of faith. There is no neutral party when we are reading Scripture, we, the listener and the reader are invited into the story. "But these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name." John 20. Scriptural blogger David Lose writes, "I suspect that John's whole point in including this story in the gospel is to affirm the faith in his community, a group of people who had not seen, yet believed."

As a reader of Scripture, I testify that reading a gospel account is a different experience than reading other books or writings. I am not reading a newspaper article. I am not reading a scientific data set. I am not reading a novel. I am not reading an autobiography, and I'm not even reading a biography! It is a gospel, a good news account, a story told with the express purpose of invoking faith and inviting discipleship. When we read a gospel story, we are invited into a carefully crafted experience of Jesus, we are invited to stand in the presence of the witnesses and come to our own expression of faith and life. .

And that's the function of the Thomas story: to draw us to our own confession of faith (even after our own doubts are expressed!): "My Lord and My God!" After hearing the whole gospel, and experiencing the death and resurrection of Jesus, through Thomas we access a hands-on experience to the tangible reality of the risen Jesus and an opportunity to work through our questions and doubts and integrate them into our confession of faith.

Gospels are written as ongoing testimonies to the lived experience of the disciples - because it would not be possible for everyone to have been in that room that evening. Beyond the inner circle

of disciples, everyone else depends on their testimony. We don't get to reach out and put our hands in his side, or trace our fingers around the nail marks in his hand. We need to rely on the testimony of the gospels. We need to trust that witness, and that it is faithful and true.

What seems clear to me, is that Thomas is not rebuked for having doubts, or for desiring to touch and see for himself. But Jesus chides him for not believing the testimony of the earlier disciples. "Stop doubting and believe!" Thomas had had the first-hand testimony of all those who had been present in the room on the first day - their excited account of Jesus' hands and side, of Jesus' greeting. And he wanted more than that. "Do you believe because you see me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" Jesus offers a benediction - in the same pattern as the beatitudes - for future generations of believers, those who will believe the testimony of the gospels and come to a living faith.

Furthermore, doubt and faith, in this passage, as elsewhere in Scripture, are not connected in the modern sense to a sense of creedal affirmations: Doubt and faith are not about what you know and assent to, or what we might call "Belief systems." Jesus is not interested in whether or not the disciples have a firm understanding of what it might mean philosophically or academically to call Jesus both human and divine. Faith and doubt are not about ideas or thoughts. Rather, in Scripture, the word for faith and doubt are much more about faithfulness, honesty and reliability. Faith comes from the Greek *pisteo*, which refers to being faithful, to relying on, to be trustworthy. Witnesses in court are called to be faithful (Prov 14:5). The parables of the steward caring for the talents are faithful or unfaithful (Mt 25, 1 Co 19). In the passage connected to Thomas, the word is not a verb but an adjective. "Do not become a-pistos but pistos". Don't become unfaith-filled, but faith-filled. Or do not become unfaithful, but faithful." The issue at hand is not whether Thomas has doubts or questions, but how Thomas will live his life. Faith and doubt / or rather, faith and faithlessness - belong not in the category of ideas, but in the family of relationships.

So also, in John's gospel, through the testimony of Thomas, we are invited to be stewards of the testimony we are given. We are invited to integrate the questions in our head with the testimony of others who have had a life-giving confession of faith. Our cloud of witnesses stories from this summer are evidence of what we are talking about: when we see someone living out their faith in Jesus in a compelling way, we are invited to pay attention to that testimony, and to bring our lives closer to a faithful journey because of that experience. We are invited to be faithful stewards of our experiences of God - and faithful stewards of the testimony that is given to us, sometimes at great cost.

In the midst of our questions and doubts, we are invited to a confession of faith and a life of discipleship. In fact, we are invited to ask those questions to Jesus face, and even, to ask for evidence and clarity. Going forward in a life of faith with integrity, I believe, is a journey of integration. It involves allowing our questions and doubts a place in our journey of faith - but not the crowning role: that belongs to our confessions of faith, and our life of discipleship.

I am confident that we are all embraced by God with our doubts and questions. Just like Thomas. Just like Peter. Our cloud of witnesses, the testimony of the disciples, shows their clay feet. That is important to. I don't have to have it all together to belong in the beloved community of disciples. I

don't have to sort out all my doubts and questions, I just need to be faithful to what assurances and experiences and witnesses I have been given in my life.

Thomas is called Didymus, the Twin. Some interpreters have said: "Thomas is my twin; his questions are my questions". Khalil Gibran said, "Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother". That quotation seems apt in the context of the story of Thomas the Twin. Perhaps Thomas is your twin too. If you come to this journey of faith with a lot of questions and doubts - you're in good company. Questions and doubts are part of the package. Jesus does not rebuke your questions or doubts. Jesus offers to show his hands and side to you; to be known in his wounds.

So then, claim your questions. Claim your doubts. Claim your faith. And live into that faith with faithfulness, clay feet and all, in the path of Faithful, faith-filled Thomas. AMEN.