

## Faith Formation: A Room with a View

John 20:19-31

September 18, 2016

This is my third sermon on the topic of Faith Formation. The first sermon explored what we mean when we say ‘faith formation’, using the images of catching Jesus—believing in Jesus, Jesus catching us and looking to Jesus to give us what we need for our journey. The second sermon used the image of the Circle of Grace, remembering that we are created in God’s image; we are loved by God; and God is always with us. Faith formation is about living deeply into this awareness so that it affects all that we are and do.

In this sermon, I want to look at the space we create to explore and form faith, and the view we have from that space. The story of Thomas provides a good window into this exploration.

Thomas is known as the doubting disciple—‘doubting Thomas’. If we call someone a doubting Thomas, it usually isn’t a compliment. This adjective for Thomas actually says a lot about what Christianity has held sacred—declaring one’s beliefs in a definitive way without doubt or question. For decades...centuries...millennia, it has been assumed, rightly or wrongly, that to claim faith means not to acknowledge questions or doubts. This is such an ingrained belief that throughout my ministry in walking with young people around questions of baptism, many have said they aren’t ready to be baptized because they still have too many questions and not enough answers. My response is always that we do not have to have all the answers; we just need to make a decision about where we will place ourselves when we are asking the questions. Which room will you choose to be in? To whom will you address your questions? With whom will you be in dialogue? Toward whom will you be looking while you ask your questions? To choose to be baptized is to say, “I’ve still got lots of questions, but I’m going to ask them from within the church or Christianity, rather than outside of it.”

Claiming faith does not mean giving up your questions, or turning off your mind. Loving God is loving with our whole selves—heart, soul, mind and strength, which includes all the things we affirm and all the things we have yet to affirm. Claiming faith and allowing our faith to keep on being formed, is to continue to learn and

grow, explore and ask questions, while also affirming where you place your hope and on what or whom you stake your life.

A witness for me of this kind of faith came early in my ministry, from a man in his 90s who was always asking questions and challenging himself to explore new avenues of faith and belief. He said some of his peers proudly claimed to believe what they did when they were baptized 60 or 70 years previously; he was saddened and puzzled by such claims, as that was not his story. He said he was always growing and changing, never holding too tightly to one belief over another, always open to being wrong. But what hadn't changed was his unwavering faith that God was always with him, accompanying him with each question and step of his journey. He asked his questions of faith and belief in the context of a relationship with God. He asked these questions from within the faith that he had chosen and claimed.

I believe that personality has a lot to do with how one approaches faith and belief. Some people are wired with questioning minds, always asking questions, always looking for the why behind any statement, challenging everything they hear and learn; struggling to say yes to what they are hearing; struggling to accept what is being proposed. And some people are wired with minds that receive and accept what is spoken seemingly without effort; maybe it's because of the relationship they have with the person speaking; maybe they need time to absorb what they are hearing before they know what they think, or before they have any questions. Some of these differences might be related to introversion and extroversion, but not all of them are. Brains are just wired differently; personalities are different. I'm one of those whose initial response generally is acceptance; who needs time to integrate what I've heard, particularly if it's something new, before I know what I think, or even know what questions to ask.

Regardless of our personality, and whether our questions come immediately and quickly, or more slowly, Thomas offers us a good model for faith.

([www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), Arland J. Hultgren, March 30, 2008) He is thoughtful and discerning, asking for what he needed in order to believe, and trusting that he would receive it. He, in fact, asks for, and receives, nothing less than the other disciples did. At the beginning of this chapter, Mary does not believe in the risen Christ when she finds the empty tomb until he calls her name in the garden, and she sees him with her own eyes. The other disciples don't believe her words, "I have seen the Lord",

or don't live as if they believe her words, for a week later, they are locked in a house for fear of the Jews. It is only when Jesus appears to them, and breathes on them, and shows them his hands and side, that they believe. It is only after all of this that they can tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." So when he says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe," he is no different from any of the rest. He is asking for the same thing that they had and needed.

What is evident, when you read these resurrection accounts, is how difficult it was for the original disciples to believe in Jesus' resurrection, even after spending a few years with him, listening to him teach, seeing him perform miracles, hearing him say he would die and then 3 days later, be raised from the dead. The words of their friends were not enough to convince them; they had to see it for themselves. We might be tempted to say the first disciples could believe so easily because they had Jesus there, and could actually see his risen body after the resurrection, but these stories show that seeing Jesus was no guarantee that belief was easier to live, even after offering a confession.

The gospel writers present a picture of the disciples as those who are on the way to faith; those who are still growing in their faith; still struggling to make sense of it and put it all together. We see them, particularly here at the end of John, as people who are saying the right words, but haven't yet figured out how to live those words; how to trust the promise, "We have seen the Lord." It hasn't yet replaced their fear; it won't keep them from asking more questions in the future. It won't keep them from being in a room with a closed door. In chapter 21, after these multiple encounters with the risen Jesus, we have the story of the disciples returning to their fishing, and Jesus appearing again to them by the Sea of Tiberias. Thomas is among them, as is Simon Peter, Nathanael and several others. While the beloved disciple recognizes that it is Jesus who is calling to them from the shore, when they reach the shore and Jesus invites them to have breakfast, they are too afraid to ask him who he is, even though the verse goes on to say they knew it was him.

This Gospel ends with the disciples reaching toward belief; knowing on one level who Jesus is and believing it, and even confessing it, but still questioning and doubting.

It's important, though, to note that Thomas is willing to ask his question in front of his peers—those who have just professed their excitement and joy at having seen Jesus. Thomas is not afraid to speak what he is thinking, and to be honest and open with his friends about what his doubt. And the disciples, on hearing his question, do not belittle him, or make fun of him, or laugh at him or tell him he should just believe them. I suspect they know all too well that a week earlier, they didn't believe Mary; they were in the same place as him, only they were too afraid to speak aloud their questions. The other disciples are a good model for us on how to receive the questions of others.

Once Thomas gives voice to his question, he is then open to being surprised; to having Jesus address his question. The text doesn't actually tell us if Thomas puts his finger in the nail prints, or his hand in Jesus' side. But Jesus knows Thomas' question, and affirms it by giving Thomas what he needs—to see and touch. In placing himself before Thomas as the answer to his question, Jesus is inviting Thomas to look to him as he asks his questions; to address Jesus with his doubts, wonderings, and fears. This kind of space for questions and exploration; this kind of validation of those questions; this meeting of Thomas where he is at; allows Thomas to then make his confession—"My Lord and my God!" It is this confession which is the culmination of this Gospel.

The Gospel begins with the Word becoming flesh--"In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (1:1, 14) The Gospel begins with the Word becoming flesh and ends with a confession of faith in that Word become flesh, full of grace and truth. This chapter ends by telling us that the purpose of writing all these things down, was so that you/we—the hearers and readers of this gospel—may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you/we may have life in his name. Thomas' confession confirms these words.

The phrase that is translated in the NRSV as "come to believe" can just as easily be translated "continue to believe". The Greek verb used here means both of these. So, these words and stories aren't just for people new to the faith; they are also for those who have been immersed in this story for a lifetime. These words

and stories are so that we will come to believe, and so that we will continue to believe.

I find it hopeful that Thomas can make such a definitive declaration of faith one moment—My Lord and my God—and then wonder with the others at a later point who is calling him to have breakfast. I find it reassuring that Jesus addresses his questions, thus inviting our questions and offering himself in answer to our questions, meeting us in the form we need.

Karoline Lewis, in her commentary on this passage, ([www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), Karoline Lewis, May 1, 2011) says that in the Gospel of John, ‘believing’ is always a verb, never a noun. It is a statement of relationship, rather than a doctrinal commitment. It is a confession of a relationship rather than a confession of faith. She connects believing with abiding—believing in Jesus is really abiding in him; choosing over and over again to sit with him, to walk with him, to look to him as we ask our questions. Thomas’ confession wasn’t a confession of dogma, but a claim to a relationship—**my** Lord and **my** God. Jesus presented himself before Thomas as an invitation to a relationship.

I don’t know if the questions you have are ones you feel you can speak before your fellow congregation members, or in the presence of Jesus. Maybe your questions doubt the value of addressing Jesus or the existence of God; maybe your questions have taken you beyond the bounds of Christian confession in Jesus as Lord and God—there are growing numbers of people attending and participating in Christian churches for many other reasons than belief—they like the music, or the art, or the architecture, or the community. If you find yourself in this place of questioning, I’m glad you are here and I pray we can be a trusting and safe space for you to speak your questions aloud. I pray we will receive those questions, not as a threat, but as an opportunity to grow in relationship with each other and with God. May we be a community that holds tenderly and sacredly the questions our fellow travellers ask along the way. May we not respond to the question by locking the doors in fear.

And if you are still here with us, asking questions, there must be some part of “this” whatever it is, that you can affirm. I invite you to affirm what you can at the same time as you raise questions about other things.

Christianity hasn't always lived into the invitation of this story to make a place for questions, nor trusted the promise that growth and confession can grow out of questioning. Churches have frequently been experienced and seen as places where you have to have it all figured out, and those who have questions keep them in silence for fear of being alienated or seen as 'doubting Thomases'. May we be a different kind of place.

The promise of this passage is that there is a place for all of us, both the original disciples in all their varied states of belief and unbelief, and those of us who are coming to faith millennia after those first disciples, in all of our varied states of belief and unbelief. Verse 29 of this passage makes room for all of us—those who believe because they have seen Jesus, and those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. ([www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), Arland J. Hultgren, March 30, 2008) And as we have seen, belief looks different for different people, and it is always a process of becoming; never a declaration of having arrived. This verse offers a blessing and an invitation for the original disciples, as well as the readers and hearers of this Gospel who are yet to come. And it offers a blessing and an invitation both for those with lots of questions, and for those with fewer questions; those who speak their questions out loud, and those who keep their questions in silence.

May our questions lead us deeper into faith and relationship; may the space we create here in this congregation to explore faith be a space of grace and freedom. May we abide in Christ, just as Christ abides in us.