

For better or worse some people get adjectives attached to their names. Something like 'gorgeous George' or 'Lucky Eddie' might not be so bad to live with. 'Simple Simon' or 'gullible Gus' would probably get uncomfortable; "Tokyo Rose" or "Hanoi Jane" are names that spotlighted some serious issues. And that bring us to the poor fellow in today's gospel that history has always remembered as "doubting Thomas." I'd like to make the case that he got a bad rap and deserves to be remembered in a much more favorable light.

I'd like to point out that first of all that all the disciples ran off during the crucifixion and when Mary Magdalene reported the empty tomb they did not all jump up and down shouting, "See, I just knew it would all work out OK." They weren't even all that impressed when Peter and John reported the same story. It's safe to say that at some point they all refused to accept this new version of reality and act accordingly – which is pretty much the definition of doubt.

Their doubt changes to belief only when they experience this new reality in a way that they simply cannot deny. I still remember the way the TV Miniseries THE BIBLE handled this scene a few years ago. Jesus appears in sort of a blaze of light but then he walks around the room and rather playfully, intimately musses the hair of each disciple as he passes. No clever argument can contradict that sort of personal experience.

But Thomas wasn't there that first night. And without the experience that changes how you see the world, Thomas is in exactly the same place and state of mind as all the other disciples before that Easter appearance.

When he does return, he's not sure what to make of this seemingly impossible thing they are telling him but to his credit he doesn't turn away thinking them somehow deranged from grief. He stays with them – giving them the benefit of the doubt in a good sense – because he knows them and has shared so many other amazing things with them.

Thomas is there the next Jesus joins them in that upper room for a meal. He doesn't speak of doubt now; there is no indication that he actually felt the need to touch Christ's wound but he does make an amazing act of faith. It is the only place in all the NT where someone addresses Jesus as God and Jesus lets it stand.

In fairness maybe history should have called him believing Thomas or insightful Thomas. Or maybe we should have just dropped all the descriptives and just let him be Thomas who came to believe in just the same way that all the other disciples finally did – through an unmistakable personal experience

Beyond defending poor Thomas, I'd also like to defend doubt itself. It is usually the honest result of not having enough or possibly having conflicting information about a decision or judgment. In law, reasonable doubt can save a life. Doubt is not a bad thing. More importantly Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is actually a component of faith. The opposite of faith is apathy – you don't care, it doesn't matter, you aren't going to do anything about it. But doubt means you are still taking a situation seriously, you want to go beyond any falsehood or deception, you care enough not to make a rash decision.

In adult religious education doubt is a powerful tool – among religious educators it's pretty much a given that you spend at least half your time trying to get people to question things they thought they knew and understood. There is an amazing amount of obsolete or simply incorrect information that people cling to as supposed doctrine. They need a little dose of doubt to move forward.

The fact that all the apostles had doubts about this seemingly impossible claim shows that, in fact, they were credible witnesses. They questioned and sorted things out; that makes them more believable because the claim of a risen lord wasn't something they immediately latched on to as a security blanket in their grief.

So occasional doubt is a healthy thing, but it isn't some place you want to stay forever – it is tiring and unsatisfying. Doubt is rarely resolved by complex mental calculations but because you have an experience that makes everything come together. For the apostles it was the unmistakable touch of a friend they knew so well. For later believers it would be the experience of a joy filled and vibrant community where the presence of more than a human gathering was also unmistakable.

Last week there were a lot more people here. Why aren't they here this week? I think it's because they are still trapped in a state of doubt. The rich traditions of the church are enough to get them to participate now and then; but the lure of society and the cynicism of the media and the fear of having to makes changes in their lives are strong enough to block a decision to make a real commitment.

I think that we should be grateful that they still drift along in that state of doubt – it means they haven't decisively turned away.

I think they also need that experience that will unmistakably say that living the gospel is worth the effort. That is our job. It isn't a matter of answering all their questions; it is a matter of showing them by our own life and actions that the way of Christ is a rewarding, energizing, joyful life that the world can't begin to match.

We need to take our cue, learn our mission from the early church. Luke tells us that the believers gathered regularly at the colonnade at Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Despite the risks of gathering in the name of Jesus, who was executed by the Jewish and Roman authorities just a few weeks earlier, and despite the repeated warnings and arrests by those same Jewish authorities against the leaders of the Church, they continued to meet in the most visible public place imaginable, right under the shadow of the Jewish Temple and the Roman Governor's palace. The Risen Christ was alive within them and among them, and as a result the Church was publicly alive for all to see. It was boldness, instead of fear, that marked this Christian movement! This was a new day in salvation history, and it was full display to the public eye.

Although many persons continued to join the Church, many others simply watched from a safe distance, like spectators at a fireworks show—drawn by wonder and curiosity, but cautious not to get too close. This much was clear about the early Church, even to the casual observer: these were people who were fearless, passionate, fervent

in their love for God and for each other, and animated by some inner strength that had transformed them. Who would not be attracted to such a movement. The unmistakable fact was that something **was** happening around and through this group of believers. Clearly, the story of Jesus and his followers did not end on that cross outside Jerusalem. It was continuing through the life and witness of the Church. The great story of God's love and presence through Christ, and his Church, was just starting.

It is the way we live as a Christian community that can tip the scales of doubt and open up the joyous experience of knowing the lord Jesus lives.