

## **Haven\_4.7 (3000 words or so)**

Haven Berkeley Faith Community, it is good to be with you in this place. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

But first, a confession. I am a reader. That's it. That's the confession, the honest-to-God truth of the matter.

When I pack for a trip, whether it be a flight across country or a camping trip an hour down the road, I first pack my books. Food? It can wait. Clothes? Later (and often, as it goes, last). Children? I'll try not to forget.

The confession continues, of course. I read when I wake up and I read when I go to the gym; I read hardbacks and paperbacks, Kindle and Audible. I do not discriminate between fiction and nonfiction, but ever the well-rounded individual, I steady a healthy rotation to the eight or nine books I'm reading at any given moment.

I have sworn to the powers that be (which is really just the walls of my house, and now, to you good people sitting here in front of me) that I will continue to read aloud to my children as long as they'll let me. *Do you want me to call you every night when you lay in your college dorm room, dear child of mine, or would you rather call me first? Mama's ready, with a book in hand.*

Appropriate to the story at hand, when I was reading a parenting book this last week, a statement about a particular kind of theory caught my attention. The authors were talking about attachment theory, you see, a theory that is a "psychological explanation for the emotional bonds and relationships between people." As it goes within the realm of parenting, children often need to employ all of their senses in order to reestablish relationships with their parent or parents. They need to touch, taste, see, hear, and feel. Whether they've been away for an hour, a day, a week, or more, children *rebuild* emotional, relational bridges with their parents through their senses.

I don't think it was any different for a man named Thomas, a man who had walked closely alongside Jesus but needed a little extra boost in order to *reattach* himself to Jesus. Later named "The Doubter," Thomas often gets a bad rap when it comes to conversations in the Church.

*Don't be like Thomas: just believe!* For some of us who grew up in the church, and particularly, I might add, within evangelical branches of the church, there were certain figures in the Bible we were *supposed* to be like. Paul, totally. Peter, sometimes. Jesus, always the right answer.

But there were also figures we weren't supposed to be like at all. Thomas, of course, was one of them. With the adjective "doubting" tacked onto the front, becoming a Doubting Thomas was one of the worst things you could do.

Within this scenario, to doubt is bad. You either believed or you didn't believe – but there was also only one right answer, which was to believe. In this world, faith cozies up in a land of black and white, dualistic thinking. Believing is equated with good; not believing is equated with bad. In an either/or environment like this, there's no room for Thomas – or for future Thomases among us, for that matter – *not* to believe, let alone to express doubt. Here, doubt lives outside the bounds of goodness, which is to say God's goodness, which is to say God.

I give you this background because when Leah and I spoke a few weeks ago, she told me a little bit about your community – and about how Haven seeks to be a safe spiritual home, often drawing in those who have been hurt by the very place that was supposed to keep them safe.

She told me about how you, as a people, seek to be peacemakers in a world thrown upside-down by a lack of peace. When the landscape often feels like it's more so dotted with hate and division, you lean toward the way of peace, which is to say, toward the one who is Peace.

But Leah also told me about the new series you've entered into on Sunday mornings: *Navigating the Maze: Finding God in the Midst of Complexity*. What does it mean to find new and even forge new ways forward when life feels more like a maze and less like a carefully scripted series of directions to follow? Perhaps even more, how are we to respond when the life we *thought* we were going to have feels more confusing than it does clear, particularly when it comes to the life of faith? What are we to do when the belief systems of adulthood look so different from the belief systems of our youth, when calling ourselves Christians was an easy, done deal, as long as

we said the right prayer and sang the right songs and believed the right things?

Because what then are we to do when the God we so easily once believed in now seems so particularly faraway? It's like we're perpetually playing a game of hide-and-go-seek we never asked to play in the first place. How then, how now, are we to find God, when God feels so hard to find, lost in a twisty maze of complication.

I think this is where Thomas comes in, where new understandings for those who doubt becomes a way to get through the complexities of life. In truth, when Leah and I chatted, I immediately thought about this moment in history. I wondered if there might be a better story to follow Easter Sunday and the wild encounter on the road to Emmaus, but the story of a man named Thomas just kept coming to mind.

So, Thomas, in all his *blessed* doubting, is what we get to explore today. Let's look at a passage sometimes simply named "Jesus and Thomas." John 20:24-31 reads...

**24** But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

**26** A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." **28** Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" **29** Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

**30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. **31** But these are written so that you may continue<sup>[b]</sup> to believe that Jesus is the Messiah,<sup>[c]</sup> the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Although these seven verses are strong enough to stand on their own, I recognize that we *get* the opportunity to unpack them this morning.

Take the first two verses, for instance. Thomas, as you might recall, is not some random dude that just happened to land near the end of John's version of the story of Jesus. But Thomas was one of the twelve, one of the disciples *called* by Jesus, who hung out with him day in and day out, who traveled with him and ate with him for nearly three years; who gave his life to him, who probably *heard* Jesus say a number of times (in a number of really weird ways) that he was going to die and then come back to life, who came to *grieve* the death of a dear friend and was very much still wading through the waters of grief when the first of two short encounters in this passage happened.

But Thomas, as much a part of the Jesus in-group as he was, was *not* with the other men when Jesus came to them. We don't know why Thomas wasn't there – or why the remaining ten didn't run and get him when Jesus did actually appear to them. So, it's in this place, which is also in a place to say of perhaps feeling left out and abandoned that the disciples return to Thomas *after the fact* with the news.

“We have seen the Lord!” They say. They're probably all crowding around Thomas, trying to get their version of the story told, excited beyond all get-out that it really did happen, that Jesus really was with them again, in the flesh, even after *death* had been the last they'd seen of him.

Does it come as any surprise that Thomas doubts their words, that he gives an ultimatum of his own?

“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.”

Jesus had been *everything* to him – his identity, his standing, his way of life. “**Who are you, O God, and who am I?**” St. Francis once famously asked. To Jesus and to Thomas both, Christ was the deepest part of their personhood and their core, the one who so thoroughly defined *who* they were, past, present, and future.

Is it any wonder that the one who so desperately clung to Jesus would be found wondering *where* this Jesus was in his confusion and grief?

Where are you, God? Where are you, when the world is going up in flames and it feels like peace is a wish rather than a reality? Where are you, when it

feels like the word “Christian” has been hijacked by far-right beliefs and extremist rhetoric, when following in the ways of Christ isn’t as easy as it used to be? Where are you, when the diagnosis came, when the realization happened, when the money ran out?

Why are you when I needed you most?

Maybe the disciples found Thomas in a moment when he needed Jesus the most, but Jesus was nowhere to be found. Of *course* he’s going to ask the man to prove it.

For some of us, this is our story too. The one who has meant the most to us, who has been the very core of our identity, hasn’t felt *there* in our time of need.

But then, a week goes by. The disciples have gathered, once again; this time, Thomas was with them. As John tells the story, “Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” *And also with you.*

Hold on. Hard stop. So, first of all, we have pushed the fast-forward button an entire seven days from the previous encounter. Thomas, the main man of the hour, might still very well be in a place of sadness and grief – and the one he loved still was not with him, comforting him in his grief. But now, Thomas is there. And this time, when they’re all together, Zombie Jesus walks through the walls. (Zombie Jesus, it should be noted, is what my friend Betsy calls the One Who Has Been Raised from the Dead).

His message to those gathered in that room? *Peace.*

It makes me wonder if this might also be part of his message to us today.

Although multiple encounters and discussions and conversation points *could* have happened in the span between Jesus-outside-of-the-walls and Jesus-inside-of-the-walls, the conversation John chooses to record and put into permanence in his book is this, a singular encounter between Jesus and Thomas.

Just as Thomas had made the ultimatum to “see the mark of the nails in his hands,” so he could put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in

his side,” in order *to* believe, Jesus says to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Jesus gives Thomas the gift of himself. Jesus gives Thomas what he needs – because what he needed was the fleshy proof of *touch*. Which returns us to that original theory of attachment. Could it be that what Thomas needed in order to *reattach* himself to Jesus was to really, actually put his fingers in the mark of his nails and turn his hands around in his palms and then touch the side of his abdomen?

Could it be that he needed Jesus to collect him, to meet him where he was at, in a place of hurt and confusion, grief and loss, disbelief and disillusionment, not so that he might believe but so that his love might be restored?

Theologian and writer Chris Barnes says the following, not necessarily of this encounter, but of Easter and of the season that follows (which is to say, now): **“The question that Easter asks of us is not, ‘Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?’ Frankly, that is not particularly hard. What the Gospels ask is not, ‘Do you believe?’ but ‘Have you encountered the risen Christ?’”**

I don’t think it’s any different for Thomas: as bad a rap Thomas often gets in the church, or at least in certain parts of the church, maybe it wasn’t ever about believing or not believing. Maybe it was simply about encountering the risen Christ.

Because when that happened, the only thing Thomas could say in response was “My Lord and my God!”

Is it not any different for us? Sometimes we just need to encounter the risen Christ. Sometimes we need to be reminded that it’s not about how much we believe or how shiny our belief looks like on the outside, or even, on the opposite hand, how much we *don’t* believe in a particular moment and thus appear far from the bounds of being a Good Christian. Because sometimes it’s simply about encountering the one who first encountered us, in the many ways God shows up.

Because, Christ in our midst. Christ in the flowers, Christ in new growth. Christ in the young child who waves hello, Christ in a teenager's piercing stare. Christ in grey stormy skies and in hail that dots the ground, Christ in periwinkle blue skies and the warmth of the sun after a cold winter. Christ in the bread we knead from scratch, Christ in the neighbors who call us by name. Christ in the grocery clerk who makes us laugh, Christ in the church potluck casserole, baked together in love.

*Christ in, Christ in, Christ in ...* Christ in all these places and in all these remembrances, God's presence here with us, embracing us in love.

It is here that we come to the last three verses of the text, when Jesus says one last thing and then the writer John tacks on a couple of thoughts for good measure.

Just as Thomas exclaims "My Lord and my God," Jesus commends those who have not seen him, yet still believe. John then finishes the chapter by stating a truth writers everywhere would swear by: the stories he's told us so far are only *this much* of the big picture. I said this of my first book and I'll certainly say this of my second book, when it eventually comes to print. There's so much more I could say. 60,000 words is like getting your feet wet.

It's no different for John, not when he then concludes the chapter by telling the reader why he did what he did – it's so that *we* might continue to believe that Jesus is the one he says he is, that Jesus *is* the Son of God, so that we might believe *and* have life.

That's it!

Call me Positive Patty here, but I have a tendency to believe that John was lighting a candle in the darkness here. He was naming that there will be *hope* in the midst of struggle: this the human experience, after all. We will struggle and we will wade through waters of grief; we will find ourselves turned upside-down by the chaos of this world, lost in a maze of uncertainty and disbelief, and also, hope is there. And also, hope is *here*.

Just as Easter begins in darkness, with "fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty," as Debie Thomas writes, this is what it looks like when "broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn."

Jesus comes in the darkness and we don't always recognize him. He looks different from how we thought he would look. He pushes back against all of my Very Good Ideas. He doesn't appear to me in the same way, at the same time that he appeared to the other ten, and this doesn't always feel right or fair. But when "he comes, he calls my name, and in that instant, I recognize both myself and him."

I am made whole. Because, **"In this world where systems of oppression sell us lies about our own value, about what it means to be human, God continues to point us toward ultimate truth, the truth Jesus calls God's kingdom. This ultimate truth is our invitation to live lives of meaning, joy, and participation in the restoration of all things. It's an invitation to allow the inclusive love of God to be the center of our orbits, drawing us in, keeping us in rotation around what's most true, so that we can reform our distorted vision of power grabbing, our propensity for both internal and external habits of abuse, and our inclination to look past those who wield the least amount of power in this world."** — **Micha Boyett, *Blessed Are the Rest of Us***

This, as it goes, becomes our both our invitation and our compass. The inclusive love of God becomes the center of our orbits, "drawing us in [and] keeping us in rotation around what's most true," so that we can find God and more importantly, be found *by* God once again.

For this is the blessing of the doubter. God finds us when and as we most need to be found – because it's not about believing or disbelieving, doubting or certainty, but it's simply about returning, once again, to the one who is love.

And I don't know about you, but that's a path I can take.