

A few years ago my family started a chat group that includes my aunt, uncle, and cousins in New England and my mother and me here in town. Besides birthday wishes and vacation pictures, my uncle alerts us when conditions should be favorable to see the aurora borealis or a good view of the planets in alignment. They may have better luck up north, but our skies always seem to be overcast any night that some celestial phenomenon should be visible. Someone shared a cartoon where in the first frame, a weather report promises a comet while a man looks through a window at a cloudy sky; in the second frame, the report promises a meteor shower while he again looks at a cloudy sky; in the third frame the radio reports a rare cloud formation while the sky outside the window is crystal clear. That's us. I'm certain that the reports are true; I'm sure that behind the clouds, the stars are falling and the moon is eclipsing and the north is lighting up, but it means less to me when I can't see it for myself.

The four gospels each narrate a purposely unique Jesus, with John's gospel diverging the most dramatically from the other three; so we can't smush them all together and get one coherent story. But see what we've chosen to remember from the different accounts. On Easter we read Luke's gospel: when the women report seeing the tomb empty and the heavenly messengers announcing Jesus' resurrection, the other disciples dismiss it as an *idle tale*. Only Peter goes to see for himself. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene alone finds the tomb empty, and in that version Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved (which is what John oh-so-modestly calls himself) go in person. In spite of these stories, we do not have an idiom about *Doubting Disciples* or *Doubting Peter* or *Doubting Disciple Whom Jesus Loved*...yet we all have heard of *Doubting Thomas*.

John does not tell us why Thomas is absent when Jesus appears in the locked room, though since Thomas soon returns, it does not seem that he has abandoned his fellow disciples or lost faith. In all likelihood, he was doing some kind of service for the group: buying food maybe, or keeping watch for the authorities from whom the group was hiding in fear. We would think that Jesus, who can now walk through locked doors, might have known that Thomas was elsewhere when he chose to visit, which makes Jesus' timing a little unfair. But whatever the reason, Thomas does not have the same experience of the risen Christ that all the other disciples have, and he insists that unless he sees and even touches Jesus himself, he will not believe.

*Believe* is a word that gets us into some trouble. In our contemporary vocabulary, we tend to say we believe something when we give intellectual assent to it—when we trust or have confidence that it is true or accurate. That in itself is confusing and unhelpful: it's how we end up with atheists demanding empirical proof of God's existence and religious fundamentalists treating established science as a matter of individual opinion. But in John's gospel *believing* never means mentally agreeing that something is true. When Jesus encourages people to *believe in him*, he doesn't mean

acknowledging that he exists; he's always referring to people living in relationship with him. We can hardly fault Thomas for not yet understanding how to live in relationship with the risen Jesus when Thomas has not yet experienced the risen Jesus. We might as well ask someone to describe a food they've never tasted or a book they've never read. In his doubt, Thomas doesn't accuse the disciples of lying; he just hasn't experienced himself what Jesus has done already done for them.

When Jesus returns and gives Thomas the same opportunity that all the rest of the disciples had, Thomas reacts in the same way the rest of the disciples did and immediately claims his relationship with Jesus: *My Lord and my God!* So far as John tells us, Thomas does not need the extra confirmation of touching Jesus' wounds as he at first claimed he would, although Jesus invites him to do that if that's what Thomas needs. Jesus' blessing of those who come to believe without seeing is less a criticism of Thomas and more a word of hope for the future, because Jesus was going to ascend to the Father, and then nobody would have the experience of seeing and touching the body of the risen Jesus, except in bread and wine. In a sense, *we* are the ones who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Somewhere an elementary school coach remembers LeBron James as a little kid who couldn't dunk, and a music teacher remembers Taylor Swift as a novice musician who couldn't play a D chord, and we remember Thomas as a disciple who couldn't believe the crucified Lord was risen...yet. John's story isn't really about how Thomas doubted but how Thomas came to believe. For Thomas, that happened to be a linear process: he at first resisted but then confessed whole-heartedly, and so far as we know, he never doubted again. For us, the strength or proximity or confidence of our relationship with Jesus may ebb and flow over time, but that's OK, because our stories are still being written—as are the stories of those around us. The stars are always in the sky, but since we rarely know the full extent of our neighbors' experience, it's worth remembering that what looks crystal clear to us may be a very cloudy night for others—and vice versa.

John doesn't give us details of the week between Jesus' two visits, but we can see that the community of disciples held both faith and doubt together; the disciples who had had a profound, miraculous experience with the risen Jesus didn't kick Thomas out because he wrestled—even refused—to believe, and Thomas stuck with them until he saw Jesus again. So we practice faith together, telling each other when we've seen the Lord, patiently encouraging those who struggle, graciously understanding those who experience life differently, and leaning on those who have more clarity when we ourselves flounder. I was reminded this week that when we say the Nicene Creed, as we will during this Easter season, we don't say *I believe* but *We believe*, because this life of faith is a communal venture. Sometimes we believe for those who just can't right now...and sometimes they believe for us...until we can again perceive Jesus, breathing peace on us and inviting us to proclaim, *My Lord and my God!*