

A healthy sense of skepticism can certainly be a good thing. I remember coming home from Kindergarten one day and telling my parents, "There's a girl in my class who's the strongest girl in the world. She can lift up a police car."

My parents asked, "How do you know?"

I answered, "She told me."

Apparently I was pretty gullible. I had to learn to be more discerning. You don't want to always believe every tall tale you hear. You shouldn't believe every spam e-mail you get promising you millions of dollars. You have to learn that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Skepticism can certainly be a good thing. Which brings us to the story of the Apostle Thomas. The story line in our Gospel is fairly simple. We're told that it's late on Easter Day.

A quick recap of the events of the Easter morning in John's Gospel. John and Peter had visited Jesus' empty tomb. When John saw the linen wrappings, we're told he believed. Mary Magdalene stayed outside the tomb weeping. Apparently she wasn't as confident as John. But then Jesus appeared to her, and called her by name. And then she went and told the rest of the disciples.

Which brings us to today's Gospel. It's evening on Easter Day. The disciples are still hiding out behind locked doors. But locked doors don't stop the Resurrected Jesus. He appears in their midst and says, "Shalom aleichem." 'Peace be with you.'

But we're told that Thomas was not there with them. Later, the other disciples tell Thomas about Jesus appearing to them: "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas doesn't buy it for a moment. 'You've seen him? Well unless I can see and put my finger in the nail marks of his wrists, and put my hand in spear wound in his side, I will not believe.'

And that's why we give Thomas the Twin the unfortunate nickname of "Doubting Thomas." He wanted proof. He wanted to see Jesus with his own eyes.

But just think for a moment. Imagine someone walked up to you three days after attending a friend's funeral and said, "Oh, by the way, your friend is alive." I think you'd be a bit skeptical.

Besides, you can look at all the others in John chapter 20. Why does John believe? Because he saw the empty linens. Why does Mary believe? Because Jesus spoke to her. Why do the other disciples believe? Because Jesus appeared to them.

In general, Thomas is not asking for anything that the other disciples didn't get. He wants to see the evidence. The disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." But he doesn't believe it.

But a few verses earlier, Mary had told the disciples the same thing, "I have seen the Lord." And when did they believe? When Mary told them? No way.

They didn't believe until Jesus made a personal appearance to them. In John's words, "He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

So, in the second part of our Gospel lesson, a week later, the Sunday after Easter, Jesus appears again. And this time Thomas is with them. And Jesus offers Thomas exactly what he asked for. He says, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Actually, doubt is a poor translation. It literally says, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Jesus is not giving Thomas a hard time because of his skepticism. Instead, he is inviting him into a relationship of faith. "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas enters that relationship fully. Thomas professes more faith than anyone else in the Gospel. Thomas answers, "My Lord, and my God."

In the Gospel According to John, Jesus meets people where they are. Jesus brings people to belief in various kinds of ways. And that's Good News. Jesus is interested in meeting individual needs.

For John, the evidence of the empty grave clothes in the empty tomb is enough. For a weeping Mary Magdalene, Jesus appears in the garden and offered consolation. For a bunch of scared disciples hiding behind locked doors, Jesus appears right in the midst of them and offers his peace. For a skeptical Thomas, Jesus invites him to put his fingers into his wounds. And next week, we'll see, for a Peter who stands in need of forgiveness, the Risen Christ brings forgiveness.

Jesus Christ meets all of these varied needs of his followers in varied and individualized ways. He meets them where they are. But he also calls them to move beyond. Mary Magdalene tries to cling. She is told not to touch him. Instead, he sends her out with a message to proclaim. Thomas is skeptical. Unlike Mary, he is invited to touch. And then he is challenged to enter into a relationship of faith. Jesus meets these people in various different ways. And they believe.

And you might say, "Well of course. If the Risen Jesus appeared to me and showed me the wounds in his hands and his side, I'd believe too. That'd be easy." And Jesus says as much. Thomas calls him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Of course, Jesus is talking about us. We were not firsthand witnesses to the events of the Resurrection. Since his Ascension, the Risen Christ does not run around earth making appearances on TV shows. But a relationship with Jesus is still possible. In fact, Jesus assumes that belief based upon something other than first hand evidence will be the normative way.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's us. Belief is open to us. That's what John's getting at at the end of our Gospel lesson. John says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

God's Holy Spirit can still lead us to believe. Knowledge of Jesus is not limited to his first disciples. Relationship with Jesus is not limited to his first disciples. Instead, that kind of relationship is open to us. The presence of Jesus is still in our midst. We can meet him through the pages of scripture. We can meet him in his Body and Blood that he provides at his table. We can meet him through the actions of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Do not be unbelieving, but believing. All of us are called to place our trust in Jesus Christ. All of us are called to believe in him. All of us are called to come to him in faith, saying, "My Lord, and my God."