Just to warn you this morning we will get into some dicey theological territory, so get excited!

Many of you may know what the acronym LGBTQ stands for- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer. Sometimes the Q can stand for questioning & sometimes there are even 2 Qs to represent queer & questioning. If you are like me, then your upbringing & experiences have taught you that the word queer is a slur. In fact, I still struggle with that terminology sometimes used & even preferred by some members of the LGBTQ community.

If you are not part of that community, I strongly advise you not to use the word queer except when speaking of or to a person who has specifically told you that is how they identify. It is a delicate word full of nuance.

At its core, queer means different or unusual. The ever trusty dictionary.com says to be queer is to be strange or odd from a conventional viewpoint, to run counter to what is normative. Basically, in contemporary usage, to be queer is to go against the grain of heteronormative & gender binary expectations. While I am unable to speak to Thomas' sexuality or gender identity exactly, I believe Thomas was queer.

Follow me on this- Thomas' questions & doubts pushed against the believing norm of the room. He pushed against the faithful experiences of the disciples in the room who just saw a resurrected Jesus. I wonder if Thomas had a history of resisting what was expected of him as a 1st century man.

Remember waaaaaaay back to maybe 15 verses ago when Mary Magdalene told the disciples she found the empty tomb. Luke’s Gospel says the disciples thought the women's words were nonsense, they were not reasonable, so they went to the tomb themselves. The Gospels have an ongoing theme that the disciples do not "get it", they don't understand, they don't believe. They do not see & understand the Messiah in front of them.

Maybe Thomas fits in better with the disciples than might seem obvious in this particular passage. Maybe Thomas is more questioning than queer, that other Q. To be questioning in the LGBTQQ sense can mean questioning long held assumptions about oneself- whether internally or externally imposed.

“You know, I do find some men attractive, but I wonder if there is something to the fact that I really enjoy close & exclusive friendships with women… You know, I was born male & told I am a boy, but I feel more me when I wear dresses. Who am I? What do I believe about myself & everything else I have assumed to be true?”

Maybe Thomas is Questioning as he compares his current experience of being told Jesus has resurrected with a lifetime of experience that says when people die, they stay dead. The text says Thomas was “outside of the house” when Jesus initially appears to the disciples at the house. I bet he regretted volunteering for a beer & chips run!
To read this metaphorically- Thomas was once on the inside of the house, of the disciples group, but now he finds himself on the outside.

There is no need to criticize Thomas. His doubts and questions reflect his active engagement. His presence back with the disciples later indicates what Lutheran pastor John Stendahl calls “elasticity of the disciples”. Their gathering was flexible enough to include Thomas and his grief, questions, doubts, & whatever else was going on with him. Is our church elastic? Flexible & open to absorbing, welcoming, engaging questions & doubts? ----- Before quickly deciding “of course!”, dig deep & think about it.

If you are familiar with philosophy or pedagogical methodology or rhetorical strategies, you are familiar with Socratic Method. The idea is to ask questions and answer questions as a path to discovery. Plato describes this method as midwifery- bringing out & birthing deeper thinking & reasoning. Questions are healthy & lead to deeper understanding. Doubts are healthy & lead to deeper understanding.

I have partly come to this conclusion because I have plenty of doubts of my own. I would like to believe that they are a sign of deep engagement when I actually mostly just find them startling.

I have doubts that I will ever fulfill my dreams of playing roller derby or having something on a restaurant menu named after me. I have doubts that prayer changes anything except the people doing the praying. I have doubts that religious-based violence, especially Jews, Christians, & Muslims in the shared Abrahamic family will ever end! I have doubts that American culture & systems can be baptized with water & purifying hyssop, then live a new life without the sin of white supremacy.

The Gospel of John has 4 primary themes: “fear of the Jews”, Jesus bringing peace, people sending & being sent, & giving the Holy Spirit. All 4 of these themes appear in our passage this morning. A comment especially on this “fear of the Jews” theme repeated throughout John including this passage. More accurately this is fear of arrest & execution like Jesus by the same Jewish leaders who made life & death decisions based on fear of losing power. This is not Jews as in the entire Jewish community. Most of the disciples were Jewish themselves.

If these events had happened in a contemporary context, a similar experience could go something like this: As Muslims gather for Iftar to mark the end of that day’s fast, they locked themselves in a banquet hall with private security at the door for fear of the Christians. Our Muslim friends have history & reason to fear insensitive Christians who throw around power without regard for the ways they, we, Christians, oppress religious minorities.

During the disciples’ experiences of fear, Jesus crosses human boundaries of closed doors & shows up in the room, unable to be stopped or contained by human-imposed

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1 Feasting on the Word Gospels: John volume 2; Elizabeth Johnson
boundaries. Jesus brings peace & “breathes on the disciples”. I’m hopeful he had a tic tac after being dead for a few days!

Breath & Spirit are a kind of pun in both Hebrew & Greek. This is the opposite of Jesus releasing or “giving up” his breath or spirit on the cross. I imagine he inhaled or gasped for air on the cross. Now, resurrected, Jesus exhales a spirit of peace & courage on the disciples.

We have no way of knowing if Thomas indeed literally touched the wounds of Jesus. The text says Jesus invited him to touch His wounds, then Thomas identified him as Lord & God. Jesus was not smug or passive aggressive or a jerk about Thomas. There was a simple invitation to touch & see. Jesus was just as present with Questioning & Queer Thomas as any of the other disciples.

In the Oscar nominated film, *Doubt*, starring Meryl Streep & Phillip Seymour Hoffman, the viewer is invited to doubt & wonder & question alongside the budding storyline. From start to finish, the viewer is left wondering- did what I think happen just happen? Phillip Seymour Hoffman plays Catholic priest, Father Brendan Flynn. He says, "Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone." Whatever your doubts are, you are not alone.

In our passage today from John, Jesus says "Peace be with you" three times. Sure, repetitions of 3 is a common rhetorical device, but I wonder if this is intended to signal welcome, reconciliation with the disciples who fell away from him & particularly Peter who formerly denied Jesus 3 times.

The Way of Jesus has room for "real" on the path. Maybe there is only space for "real" in the Way of Jesus. If or perhaps when your real includes doubts & questions, especially of essential identities, ideas, peoples, & institutions, know that you are in good company with the questioning disciples & you are welcomed by a beyond-normative, breaking down barriers, queer Holy Spirit. Peace be with you.