



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday of Easter

Date: April 19, 2009

Sermon Title: The Faith of St. Thomas

A week from Easter;
Jesus appears to Thomas;
Faith: life in his name!

Christ is risen! *Christ is risen, indeed!*
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I've been thinking about this morning, and our time together in worship today, and I have had a hunch that Thomas would be here.

That may sound surprising for a couple of reasons. For one thing, last week was when all the doubters showed up for worship. They were dragged here by their families, or they came here out of a personal sense of habit or obligation. You could recognize some of them: they weren't really into the liturgy, they didn't sing the hymns with much gusto, they stood in line for communion, slouched over and scanning the room, they checked their phones for messages from time to time. It seemed that they couldn't wait for the service to end, so they could get off to brunch, or whatever the family had scheduled next for Easter. I didn't expect to see many of them back here again today – and it isn't the snow that has kept them away.

And second, the common wisdom among Pastors is that on Sundays like this – the week after a major festival when everybody tends to show up – only the most dedicated worshippers show up. That's the day you discover who is truly committed to the church. Only those, like you here right now, who are very serious about worship tend to be here on the Second Sunday of Easter. This is the kind of Sunday that gives rise to the phrase, "Preaching to the choir."

So what I'm thinking today is this: last week we had the doubters with us in worship, but this week we get Thomas with us in worship. I'm starting to think that is why we read this particular Gospel lesson every Sunday after Easter. It used to bother me. I used to think that we should read this text on Easter Sunday when all the doubters were here with us – that maybe, somehow, they would recognize something in the character of Thomas, and develop an interest in the faith, or at least in the life of the church.

That was before I had a revelation as to who Thomas really was. I think of him much differently now than I did some years ago – I certainly have a different impression of him than the caricature of him that is found in popular culture. Just say the name "Thomas" and the instant reply from most people is [*pause and let congregation respond: "Doubter" or "Doubting Thomas"*].

That's right, but the truth is: Thomas wasn't a doubter, much as the uninformed like to imagine. As we take a closer look at his story, we discover that, instead, he was a bold and passionate believer, whose faith and relationship with God meant the world to him.

To understand that, you have to get to know the Thomas of the Bible. The Thomas of the Bible was a man who left everything behind, and for three years followed Jesus. He didn't know where Jesus was going. He didn't worry about what would happen to him as a follower of Jesus. He didn't know who would care for his family while he was gone, or how they would receive him when he

FIRST LESSON

ACTS 4:32-35

PSALM

PSALM 133

SECOND LESSON

1 JOHN 1:1-2:2

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 20:19-31

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD, WITH JOY
WE CELEBRATE THE DAY OF
OUR LORD'S RESURRECTION.
BY THE GRACE OF CHRIST
AMONG US, ENABLE US TO
SHOW THE POWER OF THE
RESURRECTION IN ALL THAT
WE SAY AND DO, THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR
AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

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finally returned. And not only that, when Jesus informed the disciples that he was determined to return to Jerusalem (in the 11th chapter of St. John), you'll recall that the disciples tried to talk him out of it. The disciples remembered the opposition he suffered the last time he was there. They remembered the angry looks and scheming plans of the Jerusalem leaders. They remembered that the religious officials tried to arrest Jesus on that visit, but were unsuccessful. The disciples didn't want Jesus to subject himself to that again, and they protested. But when it became apparent that Jesus had his mind set on it, Thomas was the one who said, "Fine. Then let's go and die with him."

This is Thomas of the Bible. A deeply faithful man, who left everything to follow Jesus. A man who missed one meeting. (And remember that meeting: the other frightened, discouraged doubters were hiding behind locked doors when they met Jesus and became believers.) Thomas missed that one meeting, struggled with his fears and doubts a week longer than the rest of the disciples, and he has been labeled as a second class believer ever since. I contend that "Doubting Thomas" is hardly an appropriate nickname for him. To think of him as one who was primarily a doubter, is to misunderstand him entirely.

We do much better to refer to him as "Believing Thomas" because, far from being an example of failed faith, Thomas is an example of just exactly what ought to happen when ministry goes as it should. It might be that the other ten are the ones whose actions are problematic – and that Thomas is the one to be admired.

Just think about what happened. Judas is dead. Thomas is out of the room. And the ten of them are hiding: door locked, blinds drawn, probably speaking to one another in whispers, lest their next-door neighbor discover who they are. These followers of Jesus aren't thinking of the resurrection news the women brought to them. They aren't thinking of what Jesus taught them about this faith. They aren't thinking about what the prophets of old said about the Messiah. They are thinking about one thing: the possibility that they, like Jesus, could be killed. All of a sudden, the risen Jesus is standing in their midst. They are shocked, I'm sure, but eventually respond with joy. Jesus is alive. Perhaps he is who he claims to be.

But take a closer look at the interaction between them. Jesus stands among them, and greets them with peace. Then he shows them his hands and side, and greets them with peace again. Then he breathes on them, and commissions them with these words: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." He commissions them to go and carry on his ministry of forgiveness. He empowers them to be the kind of people he needed to bring his message to every corner of the world. But when Thomas returns, what does he find? He finds the ten disciples – filled with joy, now, instead of fear. But still gathered together. Still in the same room. Still with the same door shut tightly. They claim to believe. They claim that joy has replaced fear. But it hasn't changed a thing. They aren't out in the streets, boldly sharing the good news. They are continuing to hide, and doing none of what Jesus has commanded them to do.

And we fault Thomas? Thomas would have been a fool to believe what they say, because their lives don't bear witness to what their words are claiming. The truth is: if Thomas had returned, and immediately believed, the world would have come to know him as "Foolish Thomas" instead of "Doubting Thomas."

So you and I are left with a fairly simple question. Are we going to be like the ten, or like Thomas?

How often has it been the case that Christ's church, centered on the proclamation of the resurrection, and led by the power of the Spirit, finds it easier to sit here in this upper room, with the doors closed, waiting for someone to come by so that we can talk to them about the good news? How often has it been the case that Christ's church, commissioned by Jesus to be instruments of forgiveness in this world, is content to restrict its forgiving work to what happens inside these four walls? How often has it been the case that others hear of our beliefs, and identify us as Christians, but see relatively little in our behavior that indicates the presence of a risen and redeeming Lord? When that is the case, our lives resemble those ten disciples who still hadn't found the faith and the courage to leave the safety of their own room, and venture out into the world with the good news of the resurrection.

Rather, let us consider what it would be like to take Thomas as our example. One who was willing to die for Jesus. One who took his faith (and his doubts) very seriously. One who didn't believe just because the

others did, but who came to believe because of his personal experience of the risen Christ. And once he came to know Jesus in that way, it made all the difference in his life.

Many years ago, a friend of mine shared a story about a wise old rabbi. Seems this rabbi was one who was waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Every day he would meet his assistant in the morning, and instruct him to go out into the streets and look for signs of the Messiah. Every day the assistant would walk around city looking for those signs. Even though the streets were bustling with Christians, no evidence of their faith was visible – no proof was seen that the Messiah had arrived. So every day the assistant returned home, and reported that nothing was changed: all was the same.

On that first Easter Sunday, Jesus graced the disciples with faith and peace, and commissioned them to share God's gift of forgiveness with the world. In the words of the Scriptures, he now commissions us in the same ministry. Our primary responsibility is to be about the work of sharing forgiveness – the work of sharing faith – with those around us. So what will it be for us? Will we be more like those ten disciples during the first week after Easter? Or will we be more like St. Thomas the Believer, whose life was transformed by the risen Christ, and who spent the rest of his life trying to share the good news of the resurrection with the world around him?

The choice is up to us.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (April 19, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{20:19} When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 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, which are not written in this book. ³¹ 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. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{20:19} ΟΟσης οὖν ὀψίας τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ τῇ μιᾷ σαββάτων καὶ τῶν θυρῶν κεκλεισμένων που ἦσαν οἱ μαθηταὶ διὰ τὸν φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ στη εἰς τὸ μέσον καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς εἰρήνη ὑμῖν. ²⁰καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν δεῖξεν τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν πλευρὰν αὐτοῖς. ἐχάρησαν οὖν οἱ μαθηταὶ ἰδόντες τὸν κύριον. ²¹εἶπεν οὖν αὐτοῖς [ὁ Ἰησοῦς] πάλιν εἰρήνη ὑμῖν καθὼς ἀπέσταλκεν με ὁ πατήρ, καγὼ πέμπω ὑμᾶς. ²²καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς λάβετε πνεῦμα γιον ²³ἂν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἀφέωνται αὐτοῖς, ἂν τινων κρατῆτε κεκράτηνται. ²⁴Θωμάς δὲ εἰς ἐκ τῶν δώδεκα, ὁ λεγόμενος

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ St. John 20:19-31, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Δίδυμος, οὐκ ἦν μετ' αὐτῶν τε ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς. ²⁵ἔλεγον οὖν αὐτῷ οἱ ἄλλοι μαθηταὶ ἑώρακαμεν τὸν κύριον. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ἐὰν μὴ δῶ ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν αὐτοῦ τὸν τύπον τῶν ἰσχυρῶν καὶ βάλω τὸν δάκτυλον μου εἰς τὸν τύπον τῶν ἰσχυρῶν καὶ βάλω μου τὴν χεῖρα εἰς τὴν πλευρὰν αὐτοῦ, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω.

²⁶Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτὼ πάλιν ἦσαν παρὰ αὐτοῦ καὶ Θωμᾶς μετ' αὐτῶν. ἔρχεται ὁ Ἰησοῦς τῶν θυρῶν κεκλεισμένων καὶ ἰσχυρῶν εἰς τὸ μέσον καὶ εἶπεν εἰρήνη ὑμῖν. ²⁷εἶτα λέγει τῷ Θωμᾷ φέρε τὸν δάκτυλον σου ὧδε καὶ δεῦτε τὰς χεῖρας μου καὶ φέρε τὴν χεῖρα σου καὶ βάλε εἰς τὴν πλευρὰν μου, καὶ μὴ γίνου ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ πιστός. ²⁸ἀπεκρίθη Θωμᾶς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ κύριος μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου. ²⁹λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς τι ἑώρακας με πεπίστευκας; μακάριοι οἱ μὴ ἰδόντες καὶ πιστεύσαντες.

³⁰Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐνώπιον τῶν μαθητῶν [αὐτοῦ], ἃ οὐκ ἔστιν γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ. ³¹ταῦτα δὲ γέγραπται να πιστεύσητε ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ να πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 20:19-31, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).