

Sermon for Sunday, April 28, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Acts 2: 25-32; John 20:19-31
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Risen Christ, open these words and our hearts with your resurrection power so that we may receive your Holy Spirit and grow closer to you. Amen.

Being Like Thomas

Doubt is the name of the game as we look at that infamous doubter, Thomas. Bad, bad Thomas. Thomas should have believed the disciples' story about the Risen Lord without seeing for himself. He should have trusted the other ten simply because they said so. At least, that's the way the story of "Doubting Thomas" most often has been presented to us.

But wait a moment. Something doesn't seem quite fair. The other disciples didn't believe Mary Magdalene or the women who told them that they had seen Jesus, did they? Luke tells us the disciples dismissed the women's testimony as "idle talk," the hysterics of women. Instead, those disciples cowered behind a locked door until they themselves witnessed Jesus' hands and side. Only then did they rejoice. The news of the risen Jesus was too incredible for anyone to believe without witnessing it, and even then, Matthew tells us that "some doubted" as late as the Great Commissioning. Thomas, not present the first time the Lord appeared to his friends, also wanted visual proof--the same proof the women and the men had received. So why does Thomas get the bad rap? Maybe we, as Easter people, can look at this story through a different lens.

What we know from scripture is that Thomas was a faithful friend to Jesus. He was the only disciple, as quoted in John, who, when Jesus took the dangerous trip to Bethany at the death of Lazarus, said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him," with Jesus (11:16). It's seldom explored, but perhaps Thomas wasn't with the other disciples in hiding out because he, like Mary Magdalene, was out looking for Jesus. Thomas deserves to be respected, not ridiculed, for wanting to own his faith because his doubts had a purpose—Thomas wanted his own experience of Jesus Christ, not someone else's. Thomas had to personally answer that essential question that Jesus asked his disciples early on in his ministry: "But who do you say I am?" That question is asked of each of us, as well. Like Thomas, we must care enough about our faith to ask for it, seek it, and struggle with it. Sometimes, we must care enough to doubt.

A colleague of mine kept a poster on her office door that read, "Jesus came to take away your sins, not your mind." God created us with the ability to reason, weigh, and judge. We are designed to be able to think about what it means when we say we believe and then to feel that belief in our hearts. Doubt doesn't mean we don't believe. Instead, doubt encourages rethinking. It can protect us by making us think twice before believing

everything we're promised, by making us pause before we give blind allegiance to such questionable entities as cults or crowds or politicians or pastors. Think of the times you have doubted something, only then to be convinced that it was true.

I view Thomas as an example for any of us seeking an authentic relationship with Christ that actually changes our lives and helps us grow in our journeys. Thomas wanted to see: "Unless I see the mark of the nails . . . I will not believe." But so often we don't want to go to the trouble to see. Doubt isn't very popular these days, perhaps because it requires effort. We live in a culture that demands we take sides by pronouncing something as black or white, right or wrong, true or false, left or right. The middle ground has disappeared. So often it is easier to simply accept what others have seen or what others spoon feed us or what others claim is so. It is much less effort to keep God in a box, safely contained between black and white, instead of letting him out to learn from and experience in the shades of gray.

When I reflect on this story of Thomas, and the journey of faith, I often think of the wrestling match between Jacob and "The Man" (who was God). They wrestled all through a very long, hard night, but in the end, Jacob walked away with a disjointed hip—yes—but also with a new name, "Israel." God blessed him in that struggle. We, too, are often blessed in our struggles with belief. We, too, often come out of them changed, but stronger.

Being a person of faith is not about carrying on the family tradition; it is not about doing something out of duty or habit. Being a person of faith, as Thomas demonstrated, is our response to the truth and grace we find in Christ, our personal answer to who we say Jesus is. Why would Thomas—or you or I-- want someone else's experience when Jesus offers us our own?

Further, our gospel story is about more than Thomas' unbelief, which get the most play. This story is actually about Jesus Christ and his abundant love and mercy as he meets Thomas exactly where Thomas is, point for point. Nowhere in this passage does Jesus scold Thomas for doubting, nor is he angry with him. We've condemned Thomas, not Jesus, nor does Jesus kick him out of the group but, instead, says, "Peace be with you," the same greeting he used with the other ten. Then Jesus extends his hands. "Here, Thomas," he says, "touch me as you requested. Experience me. Make your belief authentic," in the same way he showed the other ten his hands and side.

The disciples rejoiced when they realized the reality of Jesus' presence, but Thomas went even further. A true Easter person, Thomas acknowledged Jesus with the most powerful confession of Jesus' identity in the Gospel: "My Lord and my God!" Thomas witnessed God reveal himself through the resurrected Jesus Christ because of Jesus' gracious offer of himself, an offer that Jesus also extended to each of us when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). Again, this

offer isn't made only in the flower-covered beauty of an Easter Day sanctuary but also in the everyday occasions of our own lives, in the closed rooms where we worry and fret, in the gardens of despair when we don't recognize Jesus' presence with us, at the empty tombs where what we most wanted to find is missing. Jesus is there, saying, "Peace be with you."

Coming to believe on our own is a lifelong journey. It begins with a movement of God toward us, God's desire for us to desire God. Then, if we are fortunate, someone--a parent, friend, relative, Sunday School teacher--introduces us to God. Without them, we wouldn't even know where to begin. But at some point, we have to weigh what we've received. What matches the love of Jesus Christ that we find in scripture, worship, and ministry, and what doesn't? What holds us back from continuing our journey, and what can we let go of, or replace? As the theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

To affirm Jesus as our Lord and our God, as we do in community every Sunday, is to believe in what he taught, and to believe in what he taught requires more than mental assent. It means living it. It means moving from our heads to our hearts, just like Thomas. Living the resurrection is what makes us Easter People.

If, then, we truly believe in the Lord of Resurrection, we are called to practice forgiveness in our day to day lives. If we truly believe, then we are called to let go of grudges and reach out in reconciliation. If we truly believe, then we are called to include those on the edges and to share with those in need. If we truly believe, then we use scripture and our words to build others up, not knock them down. If we truly believe, we put into daily practice loving God, each other, and even ourselves, always with the assurance that Jesus Christ has grace sufficient for us, too.

And that brings us back to this first Sunday after Easter, where we are still on that "Resurrection high." Spiritual author Christoph Blumhardt writes, "It is not the worst if some people are unable to believe that Christ rose from the dead--at least they still regard it as something tremendous, too tremendous to glibly confess. The sad thing is that so many people today claim to believe it, and yet it means so little to them. It has no effect in their lives."

Friends, it is not enough to simply say "we believe" at Easter. It is not enough to roll away the stone. We must be willing to be carried away, swept away, and changed by the joy and hope of being believers who have met the Risen Lord in scripture, in worship, in devotions, in each other, and in ministry. We must be willing to be like Thomas.

Thanks be to God.