

Second Sunday of Easter – April 7, 2013
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

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John 20:24-29

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25) So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." 26) A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27) Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28) Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29) **Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

In the name of our living Savior, dear friends;

Most school children know that Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence. Fewer people know that he also produced his own Bible – actually he didn't call his book a Bible but he cut and pasted portions of the Bible into a book he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. He incorporated in it the moral and ethical content of Scripture and eliminated things supernatural. The Golden Rule is prominent in Jefferson's Bible, but there is no resurrection. The Jefferson Bible begins with an account of Jesus' birth without references to angels, genealogy, or prophecy. The work ends with the words: "**Now, in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus. And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.**" Those words reflect John's account of the burial of Jesus but that's not where the scriptural account ended. The Scriptures report and affirm the resurrection of Christ for us as truths of primary importance reminding us that if Christ is not raised, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins.

Unlike his Biblical namesake who confessed, "**My Lord and my God!**" after Jesus appeared to him and showed him both the evidence of his crucifixion and his resurrection, Thomas Jefferson was not a man of faith. Thomas Jefferson did not believe in Jesus' divinity, the Trinity, resurrection, miracles, or any other supernatural aspect described in the Bible. By his own admission, he acknowledged that he belonged to a sect by himself.

Doubting Thomases still abound. The truth is that there is a little doubting Thomas in all of us just as there once was in Abraham. The English Romantic poet, Lord Byron once wrote: "*There is something Pagan in me that I cannot shake off. In short, I deny nothing, but doubt everything.*" A more contemporary author and theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, "*If you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving*"

While doubt might be natural and can at times result in a stronger faith, faith and doubt are often at odds with each other. Doubt often stands in the way of Christian faith and even opposes faith. In fact as we see in our text for today, doubt can lead to unbelief. In spite of the repeated efforts of the other disciples to convince him that Jesus was alive, Thomas would not believe. **He said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."** But God has given us a cure for doubt and unbelief. Jesus once made that clear to Thomas and so today we'll use this familiar account to remind ourselves that

Theme: There's a Cure for Doubt

1. Doubt comes from within us 2. The cure is from outside of us

To begin, let's recall that the disciple Thomas wasn't the only doubter among Jesus' followers. In fact as we read John's gospel account of the resurrection of Jesus we see the doubts of numerous individuals. But more importantly we see how Jesus removed those doubts. And the reason that these events were reported is **so that that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

The first doubter we encounter in John's resurrection account in chapter 20 is Mary Magdalene. When Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb she ran to Peter and John and said, **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"** Later as she stood outside of the empty tomb weeping, Jesus himself appeared to her but she did not recognize him. John's gospel tells us that she thought he was the gardener and said to him, **"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."** After Mary recognized that it was Jesus she ran again to the disciples to tell them that she had seen the Lord. And what was the reaction of the disciples when she and the other women who had seen Jesus told the disciples about this? Luke says, **"They did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense"** (*Luke 24:11*).

And that leads us to more doubters – a whole group of them as John told it in our gospel reading for today. **"In the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together with the doors locked."** Why the locked doors? **"For fear of the Jews"** (*John 20:19*). Their fears were the consequence of their doubts. It was these fears that Jesus sought to remove when he **came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"** 20) **After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.** 21) **Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."** 22) **And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23) If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."** (*John 20:19-23*)

So you see it's not just Thomas who was a doubter. They all were. Correction, let's make that **"we"** instead of "they." We are all doubters. In moments of weakness we doubt our beliefs and believe our doubts. Thomas is simply a classic example of our doubts.

What's behind those doubts? Where do they come from? Something inside Thomas prompted him to say, **"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands ... I will not believe it."** Who's the focus of attention here? Unless I see - I will not believe. That's not the language of faith Thomas is expressing, is it? That's the language of proud reason, or in this case, that's the voice of one who attaches too much importance to personal experience.

Thomas Jefferson was a philosopher. His doubts were rooted in his reason. But any faith which relies on reason is caught in a fatal trap. Perhaps some of our doubts result from our failure to subject our reason to God's Word. But my guess is that most of our doubts are tied instead to our experiences. When things aren't going the way we think they should, we begin to wonder whether God really cares about us, or whether he really does have our best interests at heart. Something I did must have turned him off. I don't feel his presence the way I used to. Maybe my faith isn't strong enough. Maybe God is getting tired of my good intentions that so often evaporate like a morning fog. Those are the kind of doubts that come to the surface when we experience the difficulties of life.

Do you see how every one of those thoughts has my attention focused on - on me? A focus on self -- that's what allows doubts to spread and grow like weeds. And the consequences? The disciples' doubts produced a church behind locked doors, a church whose members' hands were tied and who weren't going anywhere. That still happens. Doubts stymie faith. They stifle action; they stall effort, they limit growth and progress. They leave us as Christians spinning our wheels and going nowhere - spiritual pygmies stymied by our doubts and fears. They leave us isolated and alone filled with fear and anxiety, pondering our own weakness

and inabilities and point us down the path of despair toward unbelief.

There's got to be an antidote for that, and thank God, there is. If the origin of our doubts is internal, then the antidote has to be external, and Jesus impresses on us that it is.

When the risen Lord revisited his disciples after his resurrection, he did exactly what he had done so many times before. He accommodated himself to their weaknesses. He knew why the doors were locked, and he knew what Thomas had said, **"I will not believe it."** So when Jesus appeared to them, he addressed them with sympathetic understanding and loving restraint. He didn't ask them if they wanted to vote Thomas out as contestants do in some of the TV reality shows. He said, Shalom, **"Peace be with you,"** and proceeded to show Thomas the nail prints in his hands and the spear wound in his side. And then for the benefit of us all, he said. **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

Do you understand what Jesus is trying to accomplish for us with those words? Over and over again, Jesus showed that he had fulfilled the Scriptures. His goal was to lead the disciples and us to place our faith not in what was seen but in what was written. He doesn't want us to live with doubts that haunt us. He wants us to live with confidence. He wants us to know that there is a direct connection between doubt and spiritual paralysis. He wants to move forward with confidence.

We open the door to doubt when, like Thomas, our thoughts are focused inward instead of outward - on what we expect to experience ourselves personally rather than on what our Lord has achieved for us by his life, death and resurrection. **"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification"** (*Romans 4:25*) Paul assures us. Those words, like all gospel words in Scripture always direct our attention away from ourselves to what God has done for us in Christ.

We need to remember at all times that the basis for our faith is external, not internal. Faith is based on what is objectively revealed to us as truth in the Word of God, not on what we experience with our senses or feel with our emotions. Faith is neither created nor sustained by sticking a finger into a nail print.

In a sermon on our new life as Christians, Martin Luther once said, **"This new life cannot be experienced but must be believed, for no one knows that he lives again or experiences that he is justified, but believes and hopes."** That's what the Lord once taught Thomas and the other disciples. Luther understood so clearly that **"faith lays hold, not on what human vision can perceive or experience, but on the promise of God which holds true against all evidence of sight."**

The promise of God, certified by the resurrection of our Savior, that's the antidote to all our doubts. So that must always be the primary focus of our attention as the people of God. Jesus once said, **"The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life"** (*John 6:63*). That means that if we want to starve our doubts, we need to feed our faith regularly on the words of our Lord.

There is an alarming overemphasis on personal experience in spiritual things among religious people today. Crass examples of that include throngs of people visiting shrines in hopes of seeing a statue of Mary weep real tears, or thousands of people making pilgrimages to Medjugorje in Yugoslavia where they can experience an apparition of the Virgin Mary. Others flock to faith healers or expect to speak in tongues in the hope of experiencing God more directly. Still others seek out contemporary worship services. When they try to define what they are looking for, they often express themselves in terms of the feelings and the emotions they want to experience when they worship. They are looking for a worship style that fuels an emotional high. In fact one of the religious buzz words of today is the phrase -- worship experience. For many worship is regarded simply as a religious experience which makes them feel good about themselves.

There's certainly a place for emotion and experience in our worship lives. But there's a problem if it means shifting the primary focus of our worship from the objective promises God makes to us in his Word to the subjective feelings we want to experience in worship. That gets dangerously close to thinking that to be able to stick your finger into a nail print in Jesus' hand would be more faith strengthening than just hearing and rehearsing the promise God makes to us in Christ. The inspired words of the apostle still ring true today: (Romans 10:17) **Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.**

Our Lord's words: "**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed**" provide food for thought, don't they? They promise blessing based not on experience but on faith. Ponder long and hard what those words mean for you personally. That word "blessed" includes everything Jesus has achieved for you with his perfect life, his innocent death and victorious resurrection. Your sins are forgiven. The gates of heaven are open to you. Because the Lord lives you live. Jesus is preparing your place in the mansions of heaven. The blessings we will enjoy by faith include everything your God wants you to enjoy as a member of his family, the peace, the joy, the hope that come from knowing that your sins have been forgiven and that your destiny in eternity is sealed and certain. The risen Lord is your guarantee of these blessings, the cure for doubt. Amen.