

“‘Doubting’ Thomas?”

John 20:19-31

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April 24, 2022

Our text from John concerns one of our Lord’s Easter appearances- not the one at the empty tomb but one which occurs LATER THAT EVENING to his disciples in the Upper Room and then ANOTHER appearance in the same place only a week after THAT. We’re told that they were all huddled in that place with "the doors and windows shut for fear of the Jews." Apparently, nobody took Mary’s words very seriously, that Jesus was not only ALIVE but he had approached her and even SPOKEN to her. After Jesus’ sudden trial and execution, his followers are now more afraid than EVER, worried how the religious authorities might be coming after them NEXT. The significance of the doors and windows being shut is that it transforms their meeting place into an impenetrable fortress that does far more than keep the Jews OUT- it locks them all IN. Hence, that room virtually becomes a PRISON CELL and they, in turn, have become its prisoners. The faith and hope and joy which once characterized their mission have vanished and now they’ve become captive to their own fears, shut up in their own despair, chained to their own disappointments.

They apparently forgot their Lord’s words spoken only days before, when during their final supper together, he specifically told them, “Peace I leave you; my peace I give you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” He then went on to inform them that it was NECESSARY for him to go away, the purpose of which was to prepare a place for them. However, he would soon return to take them there HIMSELF so that where he was, they would be ALSO. The place which Jesus was referring to was not some heavenly condominium which he was straightening up and getting ready for the disciples to eventually move into but rather a reference to their OWN HEART. In the same conversation, he had promised them that in his absence, he would send them a “Comforter”- the Holy Spirit to guide and instruct him. That spirit would be none other than CHRIST HIMSELF in spirit form who upon the arrival of the day of Pentecost, he would then fill them with his own personal presence and thus make their heart his new home. From that day on, they would never again be separated- EVER! And so amid all the chaos and confusion of the days to come, he wanted to reassure him with these promises that they would remain confident and faith-filled. But in their fear, it becomes impossible for them to even remember a single word he said to them.

But then, fear has a way of taking hold and causing us to forget such promises, DOESN’T it. Jesus constantly conferred his peace upon them because he understood how fear is actually the very OPPOSITE of faith, that it completely undermines it for it causes us to forget such words of hope and leads us to believe we ARE forsaken and all alone. And so on the evening of the same day Jesus is resurrected, his army of ten disciples (Judas, who had betrayed Christ had committed suicide and Thomas was nowhere to be found) are discovered cowering inside the Upper Room where they hoped those little locks upon the doors and thin bars upon the windows would keep them safe. And while confined there, the obvious questions had to have risen in their minds: What would they now do? Where would they go? Three and half years

with Jesus--years filled with so much excitement, promise, and joy--had tragically ended up LIKE THIS!

But then, just when their fear was at its highest and their faith seemed at its lowest, it says that Jesus suddenly materialized in their midst. Right at the point of their DEEPEST NEED, Christ appeared to them, to demonstrate how there isn't a locked door or a barred window ANYWHERE that can possibly shut him out. There isn't any situation in the world so dire, no trial so overwhelming that he can't enter in and transform it through his own personal presence, filling it with his grace and understanding. By emerging before them in all his risen glory, those locked doors and windows were suddenly flung wide open allowing the fresh winds of faith and hope and joy to ONCE AGAIN fill their lives and revive their hopes. Unbelievably, the journey which Jesus had initiated three and half years earlier was NOT over but was about to begin once again!

But John informs us that "Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came." We're not told where Thomas was or why he wasn't with the others. We don't know whether he had some urgent business to take care of or perhaps grew SO afraid after the death of their Leader that he fled home, back to the safety of Galilee, in order to save his OWN life. However, by not being where he SHOULD have been that night—with the REST of his brothers in that upper room--Thomas was "missing in action." Therefore, he wasn't present for what would have been the most important moment of his life. He MISSED seeing his risen Master with his own two eyes, MISSED hearing his reassuring words of comfort, "Peace be unto you," MISSED receiving the promise of his Holy Spirit along with the disciples' NEW authority to forgive or retain other people's sins. Jesus had come to calm their fears and to regenerate their spirits but for WHATEVER reason, Thomas was not there.

Well, it would be unfair to speculate where Thomas was that night or to suggest he was more interested in self-preservation than being of support to the others. However, I would argue that if you look at the totality of what John says concerning this man, he appears to be anything BUT a doubter. Rather, it reveals a man of rare courage and deep faith as I shall make the case. We FIRST encounter Thomas back in chapter 11, when Jesus and his disciples are in Galilee after having just returned from the region around Judea. There, Jesus receives word that his close friend Lazarus had died two days earlier. When he informs his disciples that he wants to return to Judea in order to "awaken" him, they protest, reminding him how the Jews had nearly stoned him back there and they were lucky enough to escape with their lives. However, when Jesus persists, it is Thomas ALONE who faithfully defends his decision, boldly declaring "Let us ALSO go, that we may die with him." Here he demonstrates an unusual courage by insisting that they all be willing to follow Jesus even if it leads to their OWN deaths.

The SECOND time we see Thomas is in the Upper Room- on Maundy Thursday, the night of Christ's arrest. Following their last meal together, Jesus delivers his "Farewell Discourse," his final words of instruction before his departure. Yet, after more than three years together, they STILL don't understand who Jesus is or the essence of his mission. Among the disciples, it is Thomas who alone has the courage to express his confusion, "Lord, we do not know WHERE you are going; and how CAN we know the way?" Here he seems willing to go wherever Jesus asks him to if only he can help them all understand where it is he wants to take

them. Does THAT sound like a doubter or faithless coward to YOU?

And then here in this morning's lesson, we have our THIRD encounter with Thomas in John's gospel. The disciples are once again assembled in the Upper Room, but THIS time Thomas IS among them. However, just when you'd expect him to leap with joy at the news that Jesus is not dead but ALIVE, his response is anything BUT jubilant. He says, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my fingers into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." It is because of those words that history has bestowed upon him the title "Doubting" Thomas. Where Mary Magdalene only had to HEAR her name spoken by him to believe, and the disciples only had to SEE him to believe, Thomas demands that he must SEE the nail holes in his hands and then be allowed to PLACE HIS FINGER in those wounds and STILL more- PLACE HIS HAND in his side. Then and ONLY THEN will he believe.

In light of these OTHER texts in John, I'm convinced that Thomas didn't REALLY need any evidence or proof that Jesus was alive but rather he was registering disgust and disappointment with himself for not having been where he SHOULD have been that night. Consider for a moment the tremendous guilt and shame he must have felt for having abandoned his brethren in their time of greatest need. Think of how by his absence, he must live with the suspicion that the others now consider him a coward and how he might even be DISQUALIFIED from any FUTURE ministry with them. And even if he were allowed to remain part of the group, he would forever feel like a second-class disciple for not having seen his risen Master FIRST-HAND when all the others had. For WHATEVER reason he had been absent, after more than three years of ministry and close companionship with Christ and the others, his standing as a disciple now seemed in jeopardy- at least to his OWN mind. Thus if Thomas HAD been a doubter, I'm convinced it was not about Jesus but rather disappointment with himself, with the SELF-doubt and SELF-disgust he felt over his decision to be somewhere else the week before.

What I think is MOST amazing about this account is that Thomas rejoins the group AT ALL. Instead of giving up on ministry entirely as you or I might have done, instead of giving in to self-hate and chronic regret, he returns to be with the others and picks up where he had left off. He refuses to abandon his close friends, but even MORE, to forsake his Lord a SECOND time when his presence is needed MOST. Thus, instead of DOUBT, we begin to see REAL MATURITY in his faith as evidenced by his renewed resolve and commitment to his brethren and to his calling. Woody Allen once said that 80% of life is just showing up. Well the same may be said of faith, that REAL faith manifests itself, not so much through amazing acts of healing or in mind-boggling miracles, but by simply showing up and regularly attempting to do the right thing, by trying to remain obedient to the will of God- ESPECIALLY in those small and routine decisions each of us has to make day-in and day-out. That's how and when REAL faith manifests itself!

But the story's not quite over. As suddenly as he had appeared the week before and in the very same manner, Jesus materializes in their midst AGAIN where he offers his followers those same words of consolation, "Peace be with you." However, THIS time, he had not returned for the benefit of the GROUP but rather for the benefit of THOMAS ALONE- to calm his fears and erase his doubts. If Thomas required proof, then Jesus would give him it to him.

He tells him, "Reach here your finger, and see my hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into my side; and be not unbelieving, but believing. Touch me, Thomas! Don't be afraid."

What's TRULY remarkable is that Thomas NEVER even touches him as he had thoughtlessly demanded, even when Jesus ENCOURAGES him to. That is because Thomas understood that it was for him and him ALONE Christ had returned to that room. Jesus knew of his brooding doubts and self-recrimination and so he would make a special appearance just to minister to him and restore his confidence. By appearing to him that night, even as he had to the OTHERS a week earlier, Jesus was assuring him that he was STILL a beloved disciple and a vital part of his future plans. For Thomas, all fear and self-doubt evaporated at once, replaced with his unending gratitude and undying love. Falling down before him, he thus makes that simple yet profoundly personal confession, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas's confession here is the CLIMAX of this gospel and for John--its author--he would have each of US arrive at that that SAME personal confession of faith in our OWN lives--to simply acknowledge Jesus as "OUR Lord and OUR God." Where the Beloved Disciple believed when he saw the garments left in the tomb, and Mary Magdalene believed when she heard the voice of the risen Christ call her name; where the disciples believed when they saw the risen Jesus and realized that it was their Lord, and Thomas believed when challenged by Jesus to touch him as he had demanded, the ULTIMATE act of belief is actually performed by those who can believe WITHOUT ever having seen him AT ALL. As it says in Hebrews, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Jesus' final words to Thomas were "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have come to believe." For John, there can be no greater praise given to JESUS than "My Lord and my God," while there can be no greater praise given to Jesus' FOLLOWERS than "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed."

Of course, we no longer have the benefit of having Christ stand before US as those disciples did that evening. No, the truth is that we now have something BETTER. FIRST, we have his Spirit—Christ's OWN spirit--who not only lives in our midst, he inhabits our HEARTS so that wherever we go and whatever happens to us, Jesus is both BESIDE us and WITHIN us to offer us his guidance and his comfort. SECOND, Christ is present to us in and through the Holy Scriptures which testify of him. When the WRITTEN word is properly proclaimed and Jesus—the LIVING Word--is presented in all his love and humility, then the presence of Christ's own Spirit within us convinces us that that proclaimed word can INDEED be trusted, that Jesus is in fact a living entity who is as real today as he was two thousand years ago. And then THIRD, people are moved to belief and confession when they see Jesus manifested in and through the faith and love of his Church. As "the Body of Christ," we become the incarnation or living embodiment of Jesus in the world. We are summoned to serve as his hands, his feet, and his voice with the result that we become his visible presence and the greatest witness there is as to his grace and to his love.

With this morning's lesson, we see what we saw a couple of weeks ago when I spoke of Jesus sailing "to the other side" of the Sea of Galilee in order to heal one Gadarene demoniac, and then again the following week when Jesus took a long detour in his travels to seek out and minister to one sinful Samaritan woman. Once again, we observe how Jesus appears for the

benefit of JUST ONE person and one person ALONE- for his beloved disciple Thomas for the purpose of wiping away all his tears and fears and self-doubts and reaffirm to both him and the rest of the disciples how he was and always WOULD be a trusted disciple of his. More than ANYTHING, it was out of deep gratitude for THIS that he fell down before him and declared, "My Lord and my God!"

What this means for US is that if Jesus was willing to travel to such obscure and out-of-the-way places just to reach one person (as he did for each of THESE three individuals) to minister to their fears and loneliness and self-doubts, then how much MORE will he come FOR US to restore the help and health WE so desperately need! We are assured that he's not only WILLING but he's also ABLE to burst into the midst of OUR upper rooms, into OUR most private prisons--whether they are prisons of fear or prisons of guilt, prisons of hatred or prisons of sorrow, prisons of loneliness or prisons of despair, prisons of addiction or prisons of shame--transforming them with those very same words he greeted his DISCIPLES with, "Peace be unto you." The fact is that NO prison can ever be so large or so strong as to keep him out. Christ will open wide the doors, he will remove all the bars, and he will unlatch all the windows so that the fresh winds of his love and his joy, his peace and his hope can freely flow through them with the result that we will never have to DOUBT or DESPAIR or BE DISAPPOINTED ever again. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for Thomas's life and the courage and conviction that we see in it. Help us to demonstrate similar courage, to venture on with the task and commission you have called us all to, that we might not languish in regret and self-pity. Thank you ESPECIALLY for the love of your Son, Jesus, who made a special visit for the benefit of calming Thomas's fears and doubts. We know that when WE go through similar trials, you are quick to be at OUR side, filling us with the certainty and power of your presence, the reality of Christ and his Gospel, and reaffirming our calling into your service. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*