

Pastor's Message – 4/11/2021  
John 20:19-31

I think many clergy who preach on this passage today and many who will hear sermons on this passage today will wonder what additional insights we can squeeze out of this tired story known as “Doubting Thomas.” But I do think that there is still value in hearing the same stories over again for there are some who still need to hear that even Jesus' first disciples had their doubts.

But we might want to flip it over and, instead of focusing on “Doubting Thomas” in the first part of the reading, focus instead on “Believing Thomas” in the second part of the story. His confession of faith “My Lord and my God!” is astounding and breathtaking.

Throughout John's gospel there has been a progression of faith statements -- starting with the narrator's statement (“We have seen his glory...”; 1:14), John the Baptist's proclamation (“Behold the Lamb of God...!”; 1:29), and Andrew's confession of faith (“We have found the Messiah!”; 1:41); all in the very first chapter. You can weave together the woman at the well and all the other confessions of faith leading at last to the foundation of our faith that Thomas spoke: “My Lord and My God!”

Like Thomas in this story, we are also those who believe although sometimes doubt. Though we haven't seen the risen Jesus in person with our eyes, many still believe. Many can testify that “the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Still, all of us at times and some of us, nearly all the time, struggle with belief. The good news in this story is that our risen Lord comes to us wherever we are, however we are, and brings us what we need to believe, never condemning us for our doubts, but meeting us in them.

Before he was the nationally famous chaplain at Yale University, before he was the minister of the great Riverside Presbyterian Church in New York, before he was a well-known activist in the field of peacemaking, William Sloane Coffin Jr. was searching for faith. He described a crucial transition in his faith-journey this way: “Slowly, I found myself changing from the seeker who looks, hoping something's there, to the kind who knows something's there, if only he can find it.”

People come to worship for different reasons. Some come in doubt, some in certainty, most somewhere in between. The church that is truly ministering in a Christ-like way welcomes all comers. To them it displays the wounds of Jesus: “Come... see... touch.”

It is acceptable to come to such a church -- even to join it -- while still asking the hard questions.

Such was true for Thomas, who -- like most of us -- didn't have it all together. Jesus still welcomed him. He welcomes us, as well.

Thomas became one of Jesus' most productive and strongest witnesses. Theologian William Barclay tells of an ancient legend about Thomas. After Easter, says the story, the disciples divided up the world for their missionary endeavors. Thomas was assigned India. At first, says the legend, Thomas refused to go. Anywhere else, but not there. Instead, he went to work as a carpenter in Jerusalem. Now, according to the legend King Gundaphorus of India planned to build a palace. Searching for carpenters, his servant Abbanes came to Jerusalem. Jesus met him. "Would you buy a carpenter?" asked Jesus. Abbanes agreed. "I have a slave that is a carpenter, and I desire to sell him," said Jesus, pointing to Thomas in the distance. They agreed on a price, and Thomas was sold. The contract read, "I, Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter, acknowledge that I have sold my slave, Thomas by name, to you, Abbanes, a merchant of Gundaphorus, king of the Indians."

When they came to Thomas, Abbanes pointed to Jesus and asked the disciple, "Is this man your master?"

"Indeed he is," replied Thomas.

"I have bought you from him," said the Indian. And after Thomas had prayed, he realized that as Jesus' servant he indeed must go.

"I will go where you will, Lord Jesus; your will be done." What he actually built in India was not a palace of wood but a church of people.

I am very aware that I preach to people with different opinions, different faith values, different beliefs and at least two different groups of people. Some, like Thomas, want to be convinced. Others are convinced and they want the next piece - how do we put those beliefs into practice? Easter Season is about the resurrection of Jesus, yes. But it also, and perhaps especially, is about the new life he opens up for all in the body of Christ and the unstoppable mission on which he sends us as his disciples. That mission wasn't just for "those people back then and over there." It is for all of us here and now, in the places and among the people with whom we live and work, and everywhere and everyone our communication, influence, and resources can reach around our communities, nation, and world.

Many people, when they hear the Easter story, think, "We are going to be with God later, after we die." More than that, the Easter story really says *God is with us now*. We are not only going to be with the crucified and risen Lord *later*; the crucified and risen Lord is right here in our midst. How we react to that testifies to how we live, what we say we believe, and what others then believe about us.

I read a news report a while ago about an Army veteran named John Crabtree who had been receiving benefits from the government. Evidently, he had been wounded in Vietnam and was on permanent disability. One day, out of the blue, he received an official notification from the government of his own death. Needless to say, this was quite a shock!

Mr. Crabtree wrote the government a letter stating that he was indeed very much alive and would like to continue receiving his benefits. The letter did no

good. He then tried calling the government and you can imagine how that went. The phone calls didn't change the situation either. Finally, as a last resort, the veteran contacted a local television station, which ran a human-interest story about his situation.

During the interview, the reporter asked him, "How do you feel about this whole ordeal?" The veteran chuckled and said, "Well, I feel a little frustrated by it. After all, have you ever tried to prove that you're alive?"

That's a pretty good question for all of us – for us as individual Christians and for us as a church. How can people tell that we are alive in Christ? How can people tell that the church has received the Holy Spirit: a spirit of power and of life? Living as believers means some kind of action. To move from not believing to seeing and then to believing takes two kinds of leaders, two kinds of action -- and they are the same two types that John's gospel highlights.

First, there are the indigenous Christians -- those in our midst who really do "get it," who see the vision. Indigenous Christians believe and communicate that the church today can be as vital a body of the risen Lord as it ever has been. These are the faithful who call others to "come on."

Second, there are the indignant Christians -- those who challenge the church and the culture for their doubting discipleship and fearful followership. While indigenous believers enthusiastically call others to "come on" to Christ, indignant Christians challenge the church with a "come out" emphasis.

Today more than ever, we need indignant believers to stand up in the midst of their congregations and silence the nay-saying, deep-sighing, gloom-and-doom attitudes that pervade some churches.

What happens when the spirit of an indigenous and indignant faith takes hold; when "come on" and "come out" become our watch-words; when believing is seeing?

- Churches with shrinking attendance don't move into smaller, "more manageable" quarters. They redesign their space to meet the diverse needs of a generation of Christians yet to come.

- Churches with unmet pledges don't slash their budgets. They make the needs known to the whole community and expect surprising, even heavenly results.

- Churches that find attendance and membership shrinking don't quit and resign themselves to being smaller. They send out scouts with provisions to see what the opposing forces are doing and what their church can offer as an alternative.

- Churches with that "silver-haired" look don't mourn the loss of their youth. They start a special "Third Age" (i.e., 60 and over) ministry, new ministries that take full advantage of the gifts of wisdom, courage, experience, and time of the aged, wise, and experienced members of the church community.

- Churches that can no longer communicate to all their members and their neighbors in one language don't fracture into separate congregations. They raise up and train indigenous leaders from their midst who can speak the variety of languages the faithful utter.

God promises and then sends the power – the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives. Sometimes confidence in that power is all that is lacking.

Baseball Spring Training is over, and the regular season has already begun. The rosters have been set and some players did not make the cut, were released, sent to the Minors or to Alternative Training sites. Some cuts were expected and some were not.

A big aspect of the game of baseball is mental. You have to have confidence in your abilities, and one way to achieve that is to get the experience you need. If a player is brought up from the minor leagues to the majors too soon, it can be disastrous. If a player does not do well and his confidence is shaken by doubts in his abilities, he may never develop to his potential. Right now, as the Milwaukee Brewers prepare for a normal, long, 162 game season, one of their highly regarded prospects, Aaron Ashby, will begin the season in the minors. His skills are highly touted, and he is penciled in for the pitching rotation at some point this year, but he's young. Some say he has all the skills, but does he have the experience he needs? The answer remains to be seen.

Doubting Thomas had not been there to see Jesus after the resurrection. He did not have the same experience as the other disciples, so he had his doubts. But that was not the end of the story. He was given the experience he needed as he was able to touch our Lord's hands and feel his side. With this experience we see how he went from doubts to belief. We are not able to have this experience as Thomas had, but we can see the results of faith down through history.

John tells us in our Bible reading today that Jesus' appearance happened on Easter evening. For fear of the Jewish leaders, he writes, they had hidden themselves away. On this first Easter evening the doors aren't just shut. They're locked. Yet, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you. That's how Jesus deals with locked doors. You may have questions, you may have doubts, but Jesus comes through even locked doors and gives the Holy Spirit. That Spirit changed "Doubting Thomas" into "Believing Thomas" and that same Spirit can change you and change the world.