



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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APRIL 3, 2016
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

A Week Later
Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

Last Sunday, after a beautiful and meaningful celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead, we departed this sanctuary and stepped into—not sunshine—but rain. While I saw no indication that the chilly March drizzle dampened anyone's spirits, it certainly did not seem in keeping with the spirit of the day.

As I have said many times, I love the image of the garden as a symbol of resurrection. Mother Nature timed it right this year because our flowers and shrubs bloomed in harmony with the greening of the grass and trees on Easter. Bright sunshine surely would have been icing on the cake!

We know, however, that the flowers would not be as colorful, the grass would not be as lush, and the canopy of the trees would not be as full without the all-essential gift of water. We will all remember that truth in August when our lawns are brown, our flowers have wilted, and our water bills are the only things growing. In some sense, then, a rainy Easter day is a gift because it reminds us of all that is necessary in order for life to flourish.

Having read today's gospel lesson, we might think that storm clouds have gathered once again. A week later, the disciples are relieved that Jesus is not dead. They are excited that Christ is alive. They are free to get up and move about the city again. They are eager to gather and celebrate life. Then Thomas comes into the room.

A week before, Jesus appeared to everyone in the upper room. Like a traveler moving from one country to another, he presented his credentials—nail prints in his hands and the rude scar on his side. It was then and only then that the disciples in that room believed he was the Risen Christ. They rejoiced and he blessed them—breathed the Holy Spirit on them just as he in God had done in creation.

What wondrous faith! Who would ever question Jesus' resurrection after being in his presence and tingling with joy as he exhaled Spirit on them? Everyone in that upper room enjoyed God-breathed faith that day. But Thomas was not there.

A week later, the disciples were still on a spiritual high, telling friends throughout the city what they had seen and heard and felt. Jesus was alive! Their excitement was palpable and all was sunshine and joy. Then Thomas walked into the room. Thomas had not been with them on the evening of resurrection Sunday. Who knows where he was? Maybe he had gone home to share the sad news with family and friends that Jesus had been crucified, had died, and was buried in a garden tomb. Or, like Judas, the guilt of his cowardice might have overwhelmed him and caused him to seek out a lonely place to grieve.

Wherever he had been, Thomas, like those of us gathered here today, was not in the upper room the morning of the resurrection when Mary and some of the other disciples shared the news that Jesus was alive. Like us, he was not there in the evening that Jesus appeared to them all, showed them his wounds, and blessed them with Spirit-life.

Neither the excitement of his friends nor the conviction of their experience would convince Thomas that Jesus was alive. This was new territory and he could not trust ghost stories and peculiar visions. He needed proof. Like the other disciples, Thomas wanted to see Jesus' hands and side for himself. He wanted to touch his Lord again and to feel the warmth of his skin before he could believe what he so wanted to be true. Like a dark cloud coming in from the west, Thomas walked into the happiness of the people in that upper room and rained on their parade.

Then Jesus appeared. As mysteriously as he had left the tomb and entered the locked room a week before, Jesus was suddenly in their midst. He offered the same blessing, one they had heard thousands of times before: "Peace be with you." And he went right to Thomas. He offered his hands and his side and invited him to look and touch. He invited him to believe. A week later, after everyone else had seen him and believed, Jesus stood before his friend Thomas and invited him to believe. Thomas' immediate response was to worship Christ and his faith blossomed anew.

The doubts Thomas had were not out of place a week after Jesus' death. Those doubts came out of serious thought and struggle. They emerged from the grief over a friend's death and the loss of a dream they all held. Those doubts had tilled the soil of Thomas' faith, loosened up hardened convictions, aerated unexamined beliefs, and prepared his heart for the seeds of new faith to be planted. His doubts were like rain which enabled his faith to grow once he saw and touched Jesus for himself.

I like Thomas because he reminds me of myself. He reminds me of these believers who, like him, have newly professed their faith. He reminds

me of you who sometimes reconsider what it is that you believe in order that you might believe more honestly and faithfully.

All of the original disciples had a decided advantage over us because Jesus was there and did show himself to his friends after his resurrection. A week later, he appeared to Thomas and he believed. I, too, would love to see those scarred hands and the blessed wound in Jesus' side. In many ways, we stand with Thomas as we decide whether or not to believe that Jesus is alive.

Whether it is a week later or nearly two thousand years after Jesus' resurrection, each of us has to decide whether or not we believe this news. Granted, as far as I know, none of us has had the luxury of seeing Jesus appear in bodily form before us. Yet we can still see the marks of crucifixion, feel the breath of the Spirit, and sense the life of Christ in our midst. We see the Risen Christ in the witness of other believers.

It was clear that each of the disciples who experienced the Risen Christ was compelled to go and tell others. Mary and the other women who encountered Jesus rushed to tell the disciples. They all gathered in that upper room to share their stories and hold their breath and pray that it was so.

That is not all. As Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles, they could not stop sharing the Good News. Day by day Peter and the other Apostles preached the news of Jesus' resurrection in the temple. Even when they were arrested for their preaching, they would not, they could not, stop proclaiming the Gospel. The news spread far and wide. Paul carried it throughout the Roman empire. Tradition holds that Thomas himself took the Gospel into India and was known for building many churches along the way. That is quite a legacy for someone who used his doubts to water his faith—and the faith of other people. As John concluded the story about Thomas he said, “. . . these [things] 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” John 20:31).

A question, a doubt, a theory, an idea about God are not a bad things. Like water in a garden, our wondering about God helps nourish growth. When we think about God, talk about God, read about God, and ponder God's presence in our lives, we touch and experience God-with-us. That, after all, is Jesus, the Risen Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

April 3, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Life has a way of getting its grime under our nails and into the folds of our skin, O God. Sometimes our routine confessions do not penetrate deep enough to erase the stains that day to day living often leaves behind. And though it may have been years since baptismal water washed over us, there are times like today when we can still feel the dampness of our skin and the water dripping from our hair. That sense of cleanliness that we get nowhere else lingers through the years, O God, and we often yearn to be clean once again. So wash us once more by your Spirit, we pray, and allow us to feel our souls shine again.

This week past has been marked by the joy we experienced in celebrating your resurrection. We thank you for all that this gift means to us and for the renewal of life that is ours. We thank you for remaining with us, for not giving up on us, and for caring enough to give of yourself for our sake. We pray that we might now live in such a way as to honor your sacrifice and to bear witness to your undying love.

While Christ's resurrection renews our hope, we know that it does not remove our cares. So we continue to pray for loved ones and friends who have particular needs. There is much illness needing good treatment and proper care. There is great sadness that longs for comfort. There is fear that cries out for assurance. There is confusion that scrambles for clear direction and there is the bitter realization that there is no more that we can do to help the ones who do not want to help themselves. Breathe your healing balm and restorative energy over us, O God. Speak your word of healing and wholeness. Guard the ones whom we can no longer protect and bring us all into your loving fold.

As the farmer harvests the wheat, the miller grinds the grain, and the baker kneads the dough, so take our lives and make of us a living bread that brings nourishment to the world through your grace, O God. Cause us to rise and manifest your love, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.