



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

APRIL 28, 2019
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Don't Forget Thomas!
Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

It is good to have our old friend Thomas back with us. What would Easter be without Thomas? Granted, he put a bit of a damper on the first Easter celebration when he refused to accept the word of his friends that Jesus was alive. They were all giddy with excitement over Jesus' appearance to them in that upper room when he should have been in the tomb. How many other people had believed them when they were told that Jesus was alive? Not Thomas! He had to go and throw cold water on the celebration. Still, his story is a part of the whole Easter story. I, for one, am glad that it is. I'm happy to have Thomas back this Easter.

Thomas reminds me of that kid in math class who always asked the teacher to go over the formula one more time when everyone else was ready to move on. A collective groan would be offered up as the teacher would explain once again how you could figure out what the value of x was in a particular equation. For some reason, that kid and Thomas were always a day late or a dollar short. Everyone else was always ahead of them. Yet, secretly, the rest of the class was happy to have that one additional explanation to clear up any uncertainties anyone had about how to solve the equation.

We, of course, know the rest of the story of Thomas and how Jesus appeared again to the disciples a week later when Thomas was with them. We know that Jesus showed Thomas his hands and his side and invited him to touch his wounds. We do not know if Thomas actually put his finger on the nail marks or brushed his hand over the scar on Jesus' side, but we do know that Thomas declared his faith in Jesus as the risen Lord.

I think it is good to have someone like Thomas around. As I said, Thomas is the person who manages to get the teacher to explain her point one more time. Thomas is the person in a staff meeting who hears the manager's latest scheme for increasing sales and blurts out, "That will never work!", which is exactly what her colleagues are thinking but would never say. Thomas is the "devil's advocate" who pushes you to reach a little further to

explain your idea and build a better case for it. Thomas is the person we rely on to say what we're afraid to say.

I'm glad Thomas is back this Easter. I imagine there were a few people in that upper room somewhere on a back street in Jerusalem who had not seen Jesus after his resurrection and cautiously accepted the witness of the disciples who had seen him. Remember, none of the apostles believed the women who had been at the tomb. Many of them thought the story of Jesus' resurrection was nothing more than an "idle tale" (Luke 24:12). There might even be a few people here today who are skeptical about the story of someone coming back to life after being dead.

It is a fantastic story, after all. We hear of near death experiences and miraculous recoveries, but no instances of resurrection from the dead that we know of in this day and time—especially three days after death occurred. I think we can understand why someone would question the veracity of the story.

Thomas will not let the story of resurrection go away. Just when the excitement of Easter is beginning to wane, when the last Easter eggs have been found, the favorite hymns sung, and the last of the ham and potato salad eaten, Thomas finally shows up fresh from spring break and with him these questions and demands for proof. We are a little irritated because we dealt with the resurrection last week, but we are also secretly happy that Thomas raises some of the same concerns we have but would never mention. Thomas may irk us a little, but we are really glad that he shows up again.

Thomas reminds us that it is okay to ask tough questions of the Gospel. After all, the Gospel asks us some tough questions and certainly places a challenging decision before us. Do we believe that Jesus lived among us in this unusual mix of human and divine? Do we believe that he was killed, died, and was buried and rose again to new life? Do we believe the things Jesus taught? Will we love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength? Will we love our neighbor as ourselves? It seems to me that believing someone could be raised from the dead might be easier than following Jesus in discipleship day by day!

Thomas insists that we sit with this story of the resurrection for a while and not move on too quickly. What really happened? What does it mean for me? What does it mean for the world? If Jesus was given new life, can I be given new life as well? If so, how? If I cannot see those marks with my own

eyes and touch those scars with my hands, how can I believe? How can God reveal the risen Christ to me today?

We know that Thomas did see Jesus and believed. We also realize that Jesus accepted Thomas' questions and lets us know that it is okay for us to look seriously at the Gospel and scrutinize it. God has handled a lot tougher challenges throughout history than our wondering whether or not we can believe Jesus was raised from the dead.

I have found that when someone challenges my understanding of what God did through Jesus, it causes me to think carefully about what I believe and why. Sometimes I have to review the reason I believe something in particular and may have to call on other supporting evidence. Sometimes such questions force me to think deeper about what I believe and cause me to broaden my understanding and strengthen my belief in what I think God has done and is doing in our midst. Thomas can help us deepen our faith. Thomas can help us believe.

There is another reason that I am glad Thomas is back. The story of Thomas reminds me of how important it was that his friends were in that upper room even when he was not. The story reinforces how important the community of believers is for people who do not yet believe.

Had the other disciples not been in that upper room when Jesus appeared, they would not have had a witness to offer Thomas. All they could have told him at that point is, "We have heard Jesus is alive." They were together, however. They were together because they were grieving Jesus' death and the death of their hopes. They were together because they were afraid for their own lives. They were together because Jesus had taught them that whenever they were together, he would be in their midst.

Because they were together, a community of believers helping one another hold onto to their hopes, Jesus appeared to them all. They saw him firsthand and were, therefore, able to say to Thomas, "We have seen the Lord!" They had a story to tell. They had an experience they could share. Because Thomas was their friend and they cared about him, they told him that they had seen Jesus and he was alive. Had they not been there, however, they would have had no story of their own.

It is likely that they encouraged Thomas to remain with them in hope that Jesus would return. It is likely that they continued to tell their story, each

one offering a detail that another one had forgotten. It is likely that they continued to relive the experience until Thomas began to see it for himself and to long to have that experience himself. When Jesus did return, Thomas was ready. He no longer had to touch the wounds. He saw Jesus for himself and he believed. Had those other disciples not been there, Thomas might not have returned. He might have given up his faith altogether. He might have believed that Jesus died and remained in the tomb.

I am happy to have Thomas back with us because he reminds us a week after Easter that it is important for us to remember the story and to keep telling it to one another and the world. I am glad Thomas is back because he reminds us how important it is that we are here together in this place some two thousands years removed from the actual events, still telling the story, still sharing our personal versions, still learning the truth, and still bearing witness to other people that Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

Thomas' story is perhaps the first story of the Church. Granted, we count the birthday of the Church as Pentecost when the Spirit of God seared each believer with the power and impulse to share the Gospel. Yet, what happened in that upper room weeks before was surely the Church coming into its own. The believers were gathered together for comfort, for encouragement, for inspiration, for strength, for retelling the story, and for sharing it with other people. The story of Thomas is the story of Jesus' followers acting like church, like a fellowship, a community of believers, which is what Jesus called them to do. Thomas' story is a lesson for us in how we are to be the caretakers of the Gospel so that we can keep the story alive.

I am glad Thomas is back because sometimes I am uncertain about what God calls me to do and how I should do it. I am glad Thomas is back because, through him, Jesus reminds me that it is okay and good to ask questions, to seek answers, and to dive deep into figuring out the extent of God's love for us. I am glad that Thomas came back this year. Had he not returned after Easter had passed, had the other disciples not thought it important to tell him the good news, had the Church never caught fire with a desire to share the Gospel, I might never have heard that Jesus was raised from the dead. You might not have heard the Good News either! I am glad Thomas is back. And I am glad the risen Christ urges us to move forward and do what his Church is supposed to do—live as Christ in the world. May every Thomas among us see and believe—and share it with others! Amen!

April 28, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God who created all things, even the extravagant idea of resurrection, we come to sing our joyful Alleluias and to lift our hearts in praise in this Easter season because we have experienced again the jubilation and hope of that first Easter morning. Some of us come like Mary Magdalene, running through the garden to share the astounding news that Christ is risen indeed! Some of us come like Thomas, hoping beyond all hope that the news is true but needing reassurance. Some of us come like Peter, wavering between our good intentions and desire to serve you and the obstacles of our own fears and weaknesses, humbled that your mercy can forgive and transform even us. Some of us come like Paul, confronted by such a powerful experience of your love that we are changed in spite of ourselves. But we all come, Merciful God, knowing that we are welcomed as your children, redeemed by your grace, and called to leave our old ways of thinking and being in order to live as your disciples. We come because we have heard and witnessed the good news of your Resurrection, and our only response is to offer ourselves in gratitude and wonder.

We pray, O God, that even in this season when we celebrate the life-changing news that Christ has conquered sin and death, you would help us also to focus on his life and ministry. As we live out our discipleship by gathering to worship you and departing to serve our neighbors, make us faithful to answer your call to minister to your children everywhere. This day we pray especially for those who, because of misdirected prejudice, oppressive regimes, disintegrating neighborhoods, or volatile relationships, live in the constant fear of violence. We lift up those whose minds and bodies are consumed with pain. We offer our prayers for those who lack the necessities of life, who lack companionship through the journey of life, or who lack hope for a meaningful and productive life. Make of us agents of healing and compassion and messengers of your peace. May this community in which we enjoy worship and learning and fellowship inspire us to live lives patterned after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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