



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

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The Thomas In Us
John 20:19-31; 2 Corinthians 4:1-12

We all have that one friend, don't we? Or at least it seems we all know someone who can't help but disrupt a perfectly lovely dinner party, afternoon at the ballgame, or peaceful scroll through Facebook by bringing up money or politics or religion. Or better yet, some combination of the three, as if the three can be separated anymore. Chances are, we all have that one friend, or maybe, sometimes, we are that one friend.

And I'll bet we also know someone who, no matter the subject, is convinced that she has the only acceptable answer, that he is the only one in full possession of the truth, or that anyone who disagrees or expresses any hint of nuance about an issue is misinformed, brainwashed, or wishy washy and surely cannot be believed or trusted. Maybe at times, we have been that friend, too.

Unless you've sworn off all forms of interaction with the outside world, you likely know what I'm talking about. We all have that one friend, or know that one person, who turns everything into an argument or steers every conversation toward a heated debate. Now, I love a good debate and a lively exchange of ideas, but the problem has become that on any given topic, it's not just that one friend or family member or acquaintance. At neighborhood gatherings and around the holiday dinner table, in the office or at school, in our circle of friends or on the television screen, there seems to be no shortage of people who, in taking a stand and making their point, have become convinced that the highest virtue is to be absolutely convinced—about everything. Just about everyone has at least one topic, or maybe dozens, about which for them there is no room for subtlety or compromise. Issues like:

- The economy and immigration;
- Gun control and abortion;
- The Middle East or Russia or North Korea or Cuba;
- Hilary's emails or Trump's tweets;
- Nationalism or globalism;
- Education and energy;
- Sexuality and science;

Racial justice or Southern heritage;
Relativistic, snowflake, godless liberals or racist, homophobic,
misogynist conservatives;
Pipe organs or praise bands;
Coke or Pepsi; Ford or Chevy;

Can we even talk about the weather without starting a debate on climate change?

Have I hit any nerves yet? I can tell you that I'm pretty uncomfortable even uttering some of these phrases. Maybe we can just talk about something harmless like sports! Well, maybe on Tobacco Road there really are some absolutes!

Have we truly reached a point when it is nearly impossible to have any meaningful dialogue or make any progress toward addressing issues because staking out our territory and demonizing our adversaries have become our main focus? Are we losing the ability to agree to disagree or to compromise for the sake of the common good because we have come to see compromise as a sign of weakness? It is hard to find common ground, after all, when so many people's views of one another are planted firmly in making assumptions rather than seeking solutions and when we shout at one another across cyberspace. And with all of the shouting—the incessant din of accusations and agendas and rhetoric that assaults us at every turn—it's hard to know how to inform ourselves about issues, how such a complex web of issues can be inter-related, which sources are reliable, and which images might be Photoshopped.

In issues of politics, family disputes, and sadly, even in matters of faith, we seem to be infected with an epidemic of pick-your-side certainty that leaves little room for real communication, compromise, or diversity of thought, and our culture is languishing from the resulting fever pitch of sound bites and memes, name calling and line drawing that divide us further and further from one another. At least I've heard that it seems that way for *those* people, over there, the ones on the other side.

It's not that a desire for answers or a need for convictions is a new thing or a bad thing. Having circumstances that are unknown or unsettled can be difficult for us. Flitting from one ideology or perspective to another or consulting the latest fads and trends before making every decision is no way to form opinions and is certainly not a firm foundation for one's thoughts. Our opinions and convictions will be influenced by our background and experiences and should be informed by evidence and input from sources we

trust. But what seems to be a growing tendency is to draw rigid boundaries of separation from those we believe oppose our views, categorizing and labeling people because they disagree with us without trying to understand their point of view, granting unquestioning loyalty to an idea because it represents a particular ideology, or stubbornly defending a position even when it becomes intellectually or morally untenable. These practices render us incapable of clear thought, objective analysis, or personal growth, much less tolerant attitudes or open hearts and minds toward others.

Virginia Satir, a psychologist and pioneer in the field of family therapy, writes, "Most people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty."

Claiming certainty in as many areas of life as possible may make the chaos around us seem more manageable and easier to control. Dualities that are black and white, for or against, liberal or conservative, and us vs them are simpler than nuance and diversity, but they are not realistic and they can be dangerously divisive and destructive. There is a reason, I think, that when we talk about matters of the heart and of the spirit which affect our complex beings, created in God's rich and magnificent and astonishing image, and when we consider the intricacies of our relationships with God and with one another, we talk much more in terms of faith and trust, about journeys and mysteries, about discerning and growing, than we do about the certainty of facts and proof and stances and positions.

Thomas wanted that kind of certainty, too. It's not that I blame him. In fact, I and many of us, would have been much like Thomas, I suspect. The disciples had left everything they had thought to be sure and stable and had trusted Jesus with their lives. They were now experiencing either the greatest disappointment or the greatest hoax they could imagine. Since Thomas hadn't been there when his friends said Jesus first appeared to them, he wanted to know for himself. If he couldn't trust Jesus, how could he possibly trust the others who had also been duped? The other disciples were asking Thomas to believe that the Jesus who had died a horrific death, the one whose lifeless body they had laid in the tomb, was now alive again! He had been gullible once; he wasn't going to make that mistake again!

But Thomas hadn't yet realized that the Jesus in whom they had trusted was the Word of God Incarnate. He was the One sent by the God who had given the child of promise to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, the God who had sent a shepherd with a speech impediment to plead with Pharaoh for the liberation of his people, the God who had chosen women—people who weren't even permitted to speak in the synagogues and whose testimony

wouldn't hold up in court—as the first proclaimers of the greatest news ever told, and the God who would turn the fiercest persecutor of the Church into its most ardent missionary.

The God who raised Jesus from the dead is not a God who deals in the probable or predictable rhetoric which pits factions against one another or in the irrefutable proof that wins debates. This God is not the defender of the strong, the eloquent, or the powerful. The God of Resurrection is the One who displays power in vulnerability, who champions the outcast, the forgotten, the defeated, the last and the least. As Paul declared to the Corinthian Church that was staking out territory and gathering evidence to argue their points and draw lines of division, so certain that they were right and those who saw things differently were wrong, this is the God who has entrusted the treasure of the Gospel to fragile earthen vessels like us—not because we support the right position or proclaim the right doctrine, not because we are so competent or worthy or reliable, not because we are strong enough but because God is strong enough, and so that we will learn to trust in his strength and not our own.

What Thomas sought was the kind of certainty that would allay his fears and prove his detractors wrong, but what Jesus offered Thomas instead was the assurance of faith. As with others throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus didn't chastise Thomas or refuse to see him because he had doubts and questions. In fact, it was at the point of his doubt where Jesus met Thomas. It was his uncertainty and his openness to the possibility of something beyond his ability to comprehend that allowed Thomas the chance to touch and be touched by Jesus, and to be changed.

And notice Jesus' instruction to Thomas, and the blessing he offers to those who would come after him: He tells him to believe. He doesn't say that Thomas should take a stand, make an argument, formulate a proof, or defend a position. He tells Thomas to respond to their encounter by having faith. Unlike certainty, faith requires vulnerability, humility, and trust. It does not rely on its own ability to analyze and understand or on the conviction that it is right. Faith responds to the invitation to reach out and touch God, to receive God's grace, and to be changed. Certainty has the tendency to become the goal unto itself and to make of itself an idol that is to be preserved and revered. Faith, instead, is focused on the One in whom we place our trust and has as its end nurturing a deeper, closer relationship. Certainty resists change and seeks to defend itself without offering room or extending grace for new insights or differing perspectives. Faith, on the other hand, is open to growth and transformation and allows space for the inclusion of others.

So then, we hear Jesus' words to Thomas not as a rebuke for his doubt but as an invitation to trust in the mystery and miracle of resurrection. And we receive his blessing for the faith of future believers, not as a warning against ever having questions or doubts, but rather as a promise that Jesus will also meet us at our point of need, bless our doubts, engage our questions, invite us into relationship, and share his gift of new life.

We learn from Thomas, then, that faith is not an answer to be discovered but a relationship to be nurtured. It is not a position to be defended but a mystery to be embraced. If we are honest, we each have a bit of Thomas in us—a mixture of questions and doubts and fears which are met by Christ's gifts of mercy, peace, and hope.

So what would it look like for us to approach the issues which confront us and the questions which confound us with the same measure of vulnerability, humility, and trust that Jesus asked of Thomas? What if we engaged one another not as adversaries to be debated or defeated but as fellow travelers on the journey who just might have a blessing to extend or an insight to offer? How would our communities be different if we loosened our grip on our positions and ideologies enough to extend a hand to someone who looks or thinks or worships differently and invite them to break bread or engage in conversation? How might we be different if we decided that insisting on being right is not always the right thing to do; that, since there is so much division and vitriol in our community and nation, perhaps it is worth the risk to release a bit of our certainty in order to make room for new understandings or different perspectives; and that the fertile soil of common ground is a good place, a holy place, for all of us to grow stronger and more fully into the image of Christ?

Of course, we can't answer these questions without being willing to dismantle some of our own defenses and lay aside some of our own assumptions. And we certainly can't speak for others. But I'm wondering how our world could be transformed if those of us who claim faith in Christ could start by allowing ourselves, like Thomas did, to be vulnerable enough to admit our doubts. How would our community be different if each of us in this congregation determined to respond to Christ's invitation to believe with a bit more openness and humility and a little less insistence on being certain? How would our lives be different if the person we see in the mirror reached out to those we have declared to be our opponents and discovered the life-giving image of Christ within them, too?

I'm not yet entirely sure either. I'm just asking for a friend. Amen.

God of creation and Lord of life, we gather to celebrate the Resurrection of your Son, through whom all things have been made new. In this season of new life, the brilliance of your world begins to cry out with color and song, and the women running from the empty tomb invite us to join the chorus of praise that Christ is risen indeed! Now we, like the first disciples, stare in awe that the Risen Christ stands among us. Though our lives bear witness to the abundance of your gifts to us, O God, in humility, we profess our faith that your redemptive work is not done, but that you continue to transform us in your image, to breathe into us your life-giving Spirit, and to mold us into new creations. Because we have received this glorious news of renewal and hope, may everything we do and say declare the truth of Christ's Resurrection and express our gratitude for your goodness to us.

But even as we claim the joy that is ours in this glad Easter season, we recognize, Merciful God, that there are some for whom even the marvelous news of resurrection cannot remove their doubts and fears. Each day seems to bring difficult and frightening news. There is still much confusion and betrayal, disappointment and suffering in our world. The darkness of the tomb still seems to envelop so many because of illness or grief, poverty or hopelessness, violence or oppression. As heirs of your grace, grant us the courage and the strength, O God, to share your good news with all who need to hear it: to tend the wounds of those who are hurting, to loose the shackles of those who are bound in body or in spirit, to walk as companions beside the lonely, and wherever we go, to extend welcome, make peace, and speak mercy.

With the boldness of those first witnesses, may we who are glad of heart proclaim our Alleluias, announcing the extraordinary news of our encounter with the risen Christ. With our hearts filled with the joy of ones who have received grace beyond measure because our God has come to dwell among us, empower us to go out from this place to speak and sing and live this hopeful, wondrous, life-changing news—Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.