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SUNDAY SERMON

I Believe, Help Thou My Unbelief

I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

April 23, 2017

Skyline Presbyterian Church

We have come a long way since we started this journey from “fan” to “follower.” We have heard the stories of some of Jesus’ disciples and how they responded to being a follower; we have looked into some of His teachings to see what He meant, to understand what it was that He was really trying to teach us about the cost of following. Along this journey we have traced His steps in Galilee, walked with Him to Jerusalem, and stood in horror as He was brutally beaten and tortured, and finally crucified. Then we declared the most ancient confession of the church, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

This declaration was not readily on the lips of the disciples immediately following what we call “Good Friday.” It took some of Jesus’ closest followers, His aunts and women disciples, to bring the Good News to the others and yet, not all heard it that Sunday morning; not everyone was there. Along with the rest of His followers only ten of the men who became the apostles were present. As John’s account states, one was missing and this is where our story picks up today.

On that first Sunday, Thomas was absent. It wasn’t until eight days later, on Monday of the next week, that Thomas was finally present with the others and there, he met the risen Jesus. I think that we have done Thomas a great disservice by giving him the title of “doubting Thomas.” We don’t give Peter the title of the “Great Denier.” I think we have it all wrong with Thomas. I think Thomas was a real believer, and an honest one. As I thought about this scripture, meditated on it, I began to see Thomas in a whole different light and that’s what I want to share with you now.

Think about Thomas. I believe Thomas was probably a good Jewish man of his day. Think of him like someone today, a good Presbyterian. Thomas went to synagogue regularly; followed the annual schedule of feast days; made required pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Temple. He enjoyed his times in worship and prayer. I can imagine that his heart was stirred at times; was warmed by the hymns and songs that were sung. In all, he was a good man. He was a believer. If you asked him he would probably tell you that he loved God. He was the kind of young man a mother and father would be proud to have come to them to request their daughter in marriage. Like most of the people of his day, he listened to the rabbis’ teaching and believed the words of the prophets especially with regards to the coming of a Messiah who would lead the nation to victory and restore the fortunes of David and Solomon. He was not a zealot, but simply a believer who honestly looked forward to this messianic age.

Then, one day in Galilee a young man, a rabbi, about Thomas’ age, invited Thomas to follow Him and become and become one His disciples. As time went on and Thomas heard what this rabbi had to say he became convinced that this really was the Messiah, the One foretold by the prophets. But, like most of the other disciples, somehow the teaching about this Rabbi’s necessary suffering and death didn’t sink in. And so they followed this Rabbi, this one called Jesus, to Jerusalem. Events immediately seemed to get out of hand and begin leading them rather than Jesus and His disciples making the events happen. They finally celebrated the Passover but something was wrong and I can imagine that Thomas was disturbed in his spirit as he tried to follow and make sense of it all.

After the Passover Jesus wants to go to a garden on the Mount of Olives to pray. So they go in the dark of night. The disciples all fall asleep after the meal and all of the wine, but suddenly all hell

breaks loose as a group of the Temple guards approaches, led by...JUDAS? They come and grab Jesus, arrest Him and take Him away. The next news they hear is that Jesus is on trial before the high priest and the council. He's put in jail overnight and the next morning taken to Pilate's palace to be tried culminating in Jesus being condemned to death on a cross.

The eleven disciples, and the rest of Jesus' followers, are in total shock and can only stand afar off and watch as Jesus finally dies. I can picture Thomas – stunned beyond belief. The greatest hope he had was shattered; he's awakened and the dream is finished – and it was only a dream that this one could have been the Messiah. But there was something so different this time; something that made it all so real. God, what have you done? If this was your Messiah, how could you let Him die? And so Thomas goes off by himself to try to sort this out. I imagine he was angry: angry at the mobs; angry at the high priests and Sanhedrin for doing this to Jesus; angry at Judas for betraying Jesus; angrier still at the hated Romans for being the instruments to carry out the sentence of the Jews. Above all angry at God – How could You let this happen? Why did you let Him die?

So Thomas isn't there on that Sunday morning, "the first day of the week," when the others found the empty tomb; heard the testimony of the women who went to the grave; and then, that evening saw Jesus in their midst, alive! Is it any wonder that Thomas didn't believe them when they finally found him and told him what had happened; told him what they had seen? I can imagine that he thought it was all a cruel joke of some kind. God had let him down. Life threw him a curve ball that he was not expecting. "You want me to believe a story like this? I saw Him beaten and bloody. I saw Him die on that cross and God did nothing to help. Now you want me to believe that everything is ok; that He's really alive? I'm sorry. I can't! I don't know what you saw, but I don't believe it, not unless I touch the nail wounds in His arms, and touch His side where the spear pierced Him."

And so eight days later, when Thomas is in the room with the others, Jesus appears. Then with the same grace and love that He had for Peter who had denied Him, says to Thomas, "Here...touch the wounds from the nails. Touch My side. Only believe." And because Thomas was a believer, and probably also feeling some shame, declares, "My lord and my God." The next words I don't believe are a rebuke to Thomas; rather I see them as words of grace and encouragement. "Do you believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and believe." The first phrase is Jesus' word of comfort, grace and peace to Thomas; the second phrase is encouragement to go on and tell others who will believe because of his testimony.

This one we call "the doubter" became one of the chief missionaries to carry the Gospel of Jesus to the east, first in Babylon, and then farther. From history we know that Thomas made it as far as the south of India and preached the Gospel. Today, if you were to visit that region of India you would find many who still call themselves "St. Thomas Christians."

So how do we see this man? Is Thomas really a doubter? Is he really so different than us? What do you do when life throws you a curve ball? You think you have an understanding of things; life seems good; things are going your way and then...BAM!!! Out of the blue the most unexpected thing hits. What do you do? How do you react? Well, we can do one of several things: Some people stumble a bit, then get up, cry out to God and go on. Others get so totally caught up in anger and despair over the situation that they run from God never to recover. Then there are those like Thomas. They want to believe but this thing that has happened – they struggle with it. When someone finally comes along to tell them to believe, as much as they want to believe they can't, so they cry out, "Show me proof! If God is real, then let Him show me."

And you know what? God is so gracious and tender and loving that if that is what is needed, that is what He will do. He will come to us and say, "Here are the scars; touch. Only believe." What is your curve ball? What do you need from God today? Like Thomas, don't be shy – stand up and declare it.

Shake your fist at God. Rage at Him. Demand He give proof. He just wants you to talk to Him; and then, He just may give you what you need and show you the proof and will say to you, "Here...just believe."

I can imagine that decades later, this is the story that Peter had in mind when he wrote the words we read from his first epistle. I want to read those words again for you. [I Peter 1:3 – 9] Think on these words with me for bit. "God, the Father of Jesus, in His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus." If anything should give us hope it's the resurrection of Jesus. There is nothing more that can be done. If we are believers, this is the core of our faith, the substance of our hope. Jesus is alive! Death has been defeated! I remember one time standing in front of the Chapel of the Sepulcher, under the great dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. My Muslim friend and I were standing there, and I so wanted God to give me something to say to him and the only words that rang through my mind that day were, "The witness of the church." The empty tomb is enough. There is nothing more that can be said or added to it. God...in His great mercy...has given us a living hope."

This hope is for an imperishable inheritance reserved for us in Heaven. If you want to get a glimpse of that inheritance, read the book of Revelation. It's amazing what God has in store for us. And in this, we are protected by the power of God. There is nothing that can hurt us even though, as Peter says, we may be tried by fire, but this is allowed so that we may show forth the praises of God through our testimony that says, "I haven't seen Jesus but I love Him; I don't see Him now but I believe in Him" and this is joy unspeakable; full of glory. All of this is based upon one thing – Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It is because we stand firmly in faith upon this one act that we obtain our inheritance, the salvation of our souls.

So again I ask you, what is the curveball that life has thrown at you? What has happened that causes you to doubt and wonder? God is ever present to show you Himself, to give you whatever it is you need, and that is for one purpose – that you might believe. I'd like to close with one last scripture, Psalm 121; and I am going to read it from a modern translation:

I look up to the mountains;
Does my strength come from the mountains?
No, my strength comes from God, Who made heaven and earth and the mountains.
He won't let you stumble; Your Guardian God won't fall asleep.
Not on your life!
Israel's Guardian will never doze or sleep.
God's your Guardian, right at your side to protect you –
Shielding you from sunstroke, sheltering you from moonstroke.
God guards you from evil; He guards your very life.
He guards you when you leave and when you return,
He guards you now, He guards you always.

Has life's curveball caused you to doubt?

Only believe and Lord, help our unbelief.

Amen.