

4/8/18 Second Sunday of Easter

## **Gospel: John 20:19-31**

*The story of Easter continues as the risen Lord appears to his disciples. His words to Thomas offer a blessing to all who entrust themselves in faith to the risen Lord.*

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these 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.

Perhaps many of you can identify certain movie lines that stand out and seem to endure time. "You had me at "hello." "Luke, I am your father." "We are going to need a bigger boat." "Show me the money." "You can't handle the truth." "Frankly my dear..." "Life is like a box of chocolates." "There's no place like home." One is found in the old Paul Newman classic, "Cool Hand Luke". Newman plays a prisoner in a southern work camp that never quits trying to escape. Each time he is recaptured the prison warden greets him with the famous line, "Son, what we have here, is a failure to communicate."

In one perspective, it is a failure to communicate which is found in the Easter stories. It matters not if those stories are found in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John; they all illustrate failures in communication or perhaps in believing in that communication. Instead of overwhelming joy, the resurrection stories are greeted with doubt, fear, skepticism, and even dismissed as "an idle tale."

John's resurrection story focuses upon Mary Magdalene. As noted last week, early on Sunday morning Mary went to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body. Much to her surprise she finds the stone rolled away. She believes that the body of Jesus has been stolen so she weeps outside the tomb. It seems like a logical conclusion. Wasn't it bad enough that they whipped, slugged, spat upon and crucified Jesus? Now they can't even let his body be at rest. Now they'd stolen it and who knows what would come next. It is in this moment of despair that the risen Jesus speaks her name, "Mary." And suddenly Mary knows that Jesus is alive.

Thrilled with the good news, she rushes to tell the disciples that the Lord has risen but is not successful in her communication. Her words are not believed. In Biblical times a woman's word was not to be taken as testimony.

Despite the fact that Jesus counted women among his friends and loyal followers, and never denied a woman's request for help, his disciples were still products of their time. They do not believe Mary. And the reality probably was that they would not have believed a man either.

The disciples were in no mood for rejoicing. Their doors were locked, for they believed that they would be accused of pillaging and making off with the body. The disciples surely figured that if Jesus, once popular figure, could end up being put to death by crucifixion, then a similar fate could very easily be theirs as well.

Into this fear-filled, locked-down bunker Jesus makes his appearance and greets his disciples: "Peace be with you." With great restraint the writer of John relates that the disciples "rejoiced when they saw the Lord." But notices it was only after Jesus showed them his hands and his side. Jesus was alive!

All the disciples witnessed this Sunday evening resurrection appearance of Jesus except, of course, Thomas. One would imagine the other disciples looked forward to telling him the good news, but when Thomas shows up, he lets the air out of their joy! Excitedly they tell him, "We have seen the Lord!" but Thomas responds with a flat, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side I will not believe." By the implication of his words, it is quite apparent that Thomas feels none of this will ever happen. As far as he is concerned, Jesus is dead, and the others better get used to it!

Because he feels left out of the initial excitement and cannot believe what his friends have told him, Thomas is known as the patron saint of all those who are the last to know. Are you the one in your family, or is it

someone else that always seem to be the last to know. Thomas is that here for sure but he is forever labeled, "Doubting Thomas, " and his very name is synonymous with skepticism.

However, history is often too harsh with this honest disciple. There is much genuinely good to say for Thomas. He wasn't just a doubter. Earlier, Thomas told Jesus that he would give his life for him. It was Thomas who asked for clarification so that he might know the way in which Jesus was going. Jesus responded by saying, "I am the way, and the truth and the life."

Honest doubt is not all bad. For a faith to be mature, it must be examined. The theologian Hans Kung wrote, "We must at some time doubt seriously, absolutely seriously, to the point of despair." An authentic believer is not afraid of questioning or subject to premature answers. Honest faith seeks mature answers and honest Christians who have doubted can make fine witnesses for the faith. As it's been said, "The believer who has never doubted will hardly convert a doubter."

One commentator described Thomas like this: "The Thomas we meet in John's account was as resistant and rigid as rock. No leaving Jerusalem. No searching for the missing body of Jesus. Above all, no believing on the witness of what others had experienced. Thomas demanded his own experience."

"Give me your hand," Jesus says to him. What Cleopas saw in order to believe, what the rest of the disciples also got to see, what Mary heard in order to believe, Thomas wanted to not only see but to touch. Thomas must touch the wounds made by nails and the wound made by piercing spear.

Doubting Thomas did not remain a cynic. He asked for proof, and when he received it through the prints of the nails and the wounds in the side

of Jesus, his doubt yielded to conviction. He fell before Jesus and exclaimed, "My Lord and My God!" Thomas did not allow his honest doubt to prevent faith from moving him to conviction.

A writer once made the point that an event, no matter how earth-shaking it may be, doesn't have the power to change people's lives. In order for an event to affect a person, it must become an experience. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was an event, but it wasn't real to the disciples until they experienced the resurrected Christ. They went from hiding in the upper room to spreading the gospel all over the world. They risked persecution, torture, and even death to tell others of the good news of Jesus.

Thomas knew of the event of Jesus' resurrection, but it wasn't until he experienced the risen Christ that his life changed. All of us doubt at one time or another. Some of us doubt every week, every day, every hour, but the story of Thomas teaches us that we can still be faithful to God even in times of honest doubt. While Thomas was waiting for proof, he didn't go off on his own. Instead he stayed in the circle of disciples until the risen Jesus appeared and erased his doubts. Here we can pay tribute to the disciples who can teach us that it's okay to have honest, questioning doubters among us. Faith can only be shared if doubters are allowed to express their doubts, so that faith can be planted. The key to Thomas' ultimate faith is that he stayed within the circle of the disciples and acted as a person of faith, until faith returned. Anyone can be faithful, when life is easy. It takes real faith to be faithful when life is tough.

There's nothing wrong with doubt that seeks answers. There's nothing wrong with doubt that ultimately sees the truth, acts upon it and then makes a claim like Thomas, "My Lord and My God." Amen.