

## Sermon for April 3 2016

### John 20:19-31

#### Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord. Amen

Every year, on the first Sunday after Easter, we are brought face to face with the man history has nicknamed "Doubting Thomas." As you know, Thomas was the only disciple not present in that locked room when the risen Christ appeared among them...showing them his wounds, blessing them with peace, breathing upon them his Holy Spirit, sending them to serve and forgive God's people. For whatever reason, Thomas was not with his brothers when the risen Jesus came calling.

A little while later, when Thomas returned to the locked room, the others told him what they'd seen and heard. Thomas was not convinced. "Unless I touch Jesus myself, I will not believe!"

When I ponder this obdurate response from Thomas, part of me wants to smack him on the back side of his head and reprimand him for summarily discounting the witness of his friends. No sense of loyalty or trust whatsoever. For three years he'd eaten, slept, travelled and served with these other disciples. How could he have such little regard for their first-hand, eye-witness account of Christ's return?

Another part of me, however, remembers that this knee-jerk response from Thomas is pretty typical of his behavior. You'll remember, for example, that in John 14, Jesus says, "Where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas immediately responds, "No, Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Or earlier in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John when Jesus says to his disciples, "Lazarus is dead...Let us go to him...", Thomas' response is rather cryptic but seems down in the mouth to me, "Sure, let's go, too, so that we may die with him." And the very fact that Thomas is not cowering with the other disciples behind locked doors when Jesus first appeared says a lot about his independent streak and his willingness to stubbornly face the world alone - if need be. In light of all this, Thomas' response, "I will not believe!"...does not seem uncharacteristic or surprising at all.

The truth is, of course, that Thomas only wants what the other disciples have already received...a chance to see, to touch, to experience the risen Christ for himself. That's not so difficult to understand. You and I might have wanted the same thing if we'd been there. Somehow, it doesn't seem fair then to saddle Thomas with the name "Doubting" Thomas when he's only seeking what the others were already given?

And when Jesus does re-appear to the disciples a week later...when Thomas is present as well, Jesus gives him what he's wanted and invites him to touch and believe. Without skipping a beat, Thomas immediately, boldly declares his devotion to Jesus in no uncertain terms: "My Lord and my God." These are not the words of a "Doubting" Thomas. They belong to a Believing Thomas...a Proclaiming Thomas...a Decisive Thomas.

Furthermore, in response to those who would interpret Jesus' final words to Thomas as words of criticism or condemnation, I would argue that there's no overriding sense of chiding or scolding at all. Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." For my money, although these words are attributed to Jesus, they seem

more like the words the Gospel writer himself, expressing his hope, some sixty years after Christ's death and resurrection, that all of his readers and his contemporaries will somehow come to faith in Jesus without having the possibility of seeing Jesus themselves.

I think this entire story stands as encouragement to anyone who reads John's Gospel...an invitation to engage faith in the risen Christ with whatever it takes. John might well say that we're all Thomases trying to believe in Jesus with whatever we have at hand. The truth is that some of us believe more easily than others of us. We're not all the same. Some of us are stuck with nagging questions and concerns which are part and parcel of our approach to faith in the risen Christ. Some of us are wrestling every day with issues of faith and belief.

Thus for me, John's Gospel is a passionate attempt to assure everyone that faith is possible. "I have written all these things hoping that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

As I preach this morning, please understand that I am especially addressing those of you who struggle with questions, who seek clarity, who harbor doubts, who skirt with skepticism, whose faith is still under construction. You are Thomas...not "Doubting" Thomas...but Thoughtful Thomas, Engaged Thomas, Courageous Thomas, Curious Thomas, Honest Thomas.

This morning, I wish to commend all of you for your seriousness, your integrity, your desire to learn and grow, your curiosity about things earthly and heavenly, your faithfulness in spite of uncertainty. I firmly believe that your questions and even your doubts are gifts from the Spirit and signs of your being drawn to the Christ. I believe that faith is born, nurtured and renewed in the soil of curiosity and conversation. I believe that the Holy Spirit is hard at work in midst of our wrestling and our struggles. I believe that Christ's Spirit will give us what we need.

And so I say to each of you Thomases: "Hang in there! Don't quit! Keep asking hard questions! Stay in conversation with God's people and God's word! Be as courageous as your namesake in your quest for a deeper faith."

Finally, as a way of encouraging you and accompanying you on this journey, I have an odd invitation for all of you this morning. In the pew racks in front of you, there are little pads of paper and fairly sharp pencils. I'd like you take a piece of paper and write down any question you might have about Jesus, the church, God, creation, life, whatever.

You don't need to add your name if you don't want to...that's not necessarily important. What is important is knowing that your questions are welcome in this church. Take a moment now to write your question or your concern...and in a few minutes, when the offering is collected, place your piece of paper in the offering basket. Give your question or your concern to the Lord. Know that the gift of your mind, your thoughts, your questions, your faith is indeed acceptable and pleasing to the Lord who loves you so much.

I'll give you a minute...and then close with a blessing.

(MINUTE)

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon you with favor and (+) give you peace. Amen