

# He Came Back for One

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

Easter 2

April 27-28, 2019

John 20:19-31

*Grace and peace to you from Christ, who is risen. Who is alive. Who continues to show up and offer his scarred, wounded living body to his beloveds. So that we all experience everlasting peace. Amen.*

## **Move 1: Changing label of Thomas**

We continue in John's Gospel. The action all takes place in a locked upper room where the disciples are hiding out. This is where Jesus meets his inner circle following his resurrection.

For too long, the focal point has been on Thomas. For too long, we, as the Universal Church, have approached him negatively and taught, "Don't be like Thomas."

We have looked down on Thomas. We have wagged our shame fingers at him for asking to see Jesus' wounds for himself. "For shame, sir. For shame."

It's time we move on from Thomas' unfair label as "Doubting Thomas."

This weekend, I want to strip this label from Thomas. And I want us to start to see Thomas with a different perspective.

For me, I applaud Thomas. I have always called him "Skeptic Thomas." The one bold enough to say what he needs. Trusting the Lord will meet him there. Wanting so badly to experience Christ with his own eyes that he names it. Trusting the Lord will provide it.

He represents all of us: our real and authentic desire to encounter Jesus.

Thomas didn't doubt; he just doesn't want his faith and hope to be based on hearsay. In order to believe, he wants his own testimony. Resurrection moment. Easter experience.

Easter isn't done. It's not a one-day event and pack it up. As the Church, Easter is just beginning. As we enter into this season of Easter, we admit the secular hoopla is gone. The pageantry is behind us. The hosting. Food. Egg hunts. That's over.

All that work leading up to Easter! How many times did I say, "I'll get to that after Easter"? Well, that work is now waiting for me.

And what awaits us? Life. Regular, daily life is back. And we, as faithful saints, must "come to terms with our hidden fears, angers and doubts and decide if the resurrection is real enough for regular life." [1]

That's why we need Thomas today. We need a skeptic brash enough, bold enough, and direct enough to say how we all feel.

We don't wag our shame fingers at him. We embrace his genuine and deep longing.

We, like Thomas, wish we had been there. If only we had been Mary Magdalene and heard Jesus call out our name outside the empty tomb. If only we had been one of the disciples at the Last Supper and had Jesus break bread with us. If only we had been the other apostles and seen Jesus' wounded hands and side. If only. [2]

Thomas isn't a villain. He is a devout skeptic. My kind of guy. Someone who doesn't pretend to have it all together. Someone who takes his faith seriously. Someone who names what we are all feeling a week after Easter.

I, too, want to experience Christ.

When labels get attached, they are hard to break. Stripping away the label of Thomas as "Doubting Thomas" means questioning previous teaching. But my hope is we can be open.

Because, to me, this passage isn't about Thomas' doubts. The message of this weekend isn't about finger shaming, morality, or doubt. It's about Christ coming back. Coming back to meet the one individual who missed out.

Breaking through the locked rooms we hide behind to offer us peace.  
Coming back for those of us who are lost, weary, and broken-hearted. [3]

Scripture today doesn't place doubt against faith. In fact, doubt is a *part* of faith. It's natural. Longing, desiring an encounter with Christ; questioning, struggling when life is messy—these are a part of our faith walk. Thomas embodies this.

So we strip away the label and enter the Gospel story with fresh eyes. Ready to hear anew how Jesus breaks into our lives and offers peace. To learn from Skeptic Thomas that God truly does meet each of us individually. That God cares about our deep desires. That God meets those who genuinely want to encounter the Risen Lord.

## **Move 2: Impression with Ben**

A label and bad first impression almost cost me a relationship with my now best friend, Ben.

As you know, I went to Augustana College for my undergraduate degree. No one else from my high school went to Augie, so I didn't know anyone there. That first week was super awkward; I was super awkward.

During the first weekend, I heard there were some on-campus parties after all the first-year festivities. But I didn't know where any of these places were. So, when I was in the bathroom getting my hair all gelled up and perfect, in walked this big, tall guy

I thought, he looks cool. I'll ask him where he's headed tonight. So I said, "Hey bro, you know where any parties are at?"

The guy just looked at me and laughed out loud. "Sorry, bro, I don't. But you can chill with a few of us down the hall if you'd like. We just watching TV and hanging out."

'No,' I thought.' Thanks for offering, but, I'm gonna explore campus a bit.'

Next day, I'm headed to class and see the same dude walking toward me. He says, "What's up?"

I am super awkward. I try to say , “Hi,” but all that comes out is a whispered, “Hey.”

And I keep walking. After a couple steps I hear, “Or not, bro man.”

Now, he thought I was a pretentious frat boy. And I thought he was too cool for school and abrasive. That was how we labeled each other.

Yet over more interactions—and me not trying to be cool, getting more comfortable with myself—we became best friends.

Ben is one of the most caring and thoughtful people I know. I think his impressions of me have changed as well.

Today, we both admit that we almost closed the door on each other. Due to labels we had come up with.

We do this all the time. With people. With characters in Scripture. With passages of Scripture. We come up with an understanding about an idea, passage, or person and think it’s permanent. And we close off.

My hope is that we find openness: to questioning, to being pillars of Christian faith.

Thomas has gotten a bad rap through the years. If we can enter John’s Gospel ready to question our previously held labels, we can be open to hearing how God is revealing newness and peace through this passage.

### **Move 3: Scripture**

We back up for a moment and remember where we left off last week. We ended with Mary Magdalene returning from the empty tomb. She, Peter, and the other disciple had seen the linen wrappings neatly placed. Peter and the other disciple leave saddened thinking their Lord has been taken.

Mary stays behind, still deeply grieving. And that’s when she is greeted by the Risen Lord. Yet she doesn’t even realize this incredible encounter is taking place. She presumes this man meeting her is a gardener. It’s not until Christ says her name, “Mary,” that she realizes Jesus isn’t dead. He hasn’t been stolen. He has done what he said he would do. Her Lord is risen! She rushes to the disciples and tells them, “I have seen my Lord.”

This week is the continuation of the resurrection narrative in John's Gospel. We would expect the disciples to be partying. Rejoicing at the news Mary shared with them.

Yet that's not the mood of the disciples. That's not the scene we enter into.

The disciples had all heard Mary's testimony. And maybe they believed her. Maybe they didn't. But, in either case, they all find themselves sitting in darkness. Lost. Confused. Angry. And fearful.

This is where Jesus finds the disciples. He meets them in the dark, locked room. He breaks in and offers them the peace they are so desperately needing. Notice that, much like Mary, the apostles don't recognize Jesus until they see his wounds.

Jesus leaves, and the disciples are all giddy. Thomas returns after running errands. (He had drawn the short straw to go get coffee and donuts for the crew.) And we can hear how disappointed he is.

The other apostles are joyful. Hope-filled. Thomas isn't. And he says he cannot believe without experiencing what they experienced. He wants that.

A few days later the disciples are still locked away. But this time Thomas is there. Jesus enters again.

The natural question is why. Why does Jesus come back a second time? He had already offered peace to the apostles. Already breathed the Holy Spirit on them. Given them ability and call.

Why again? And the answer is simple: It's for one person. Thomas.

Jesus comes back because he cares about Thomas. He wants Thomas to encounter him. So Thomas can have that profound moment when he realizes the Risen Christ isn't just a Lord. Or the Lord.

Jesus is Thomas's Lord. His God.

#### **Move 4: God leaves the 99 for the 1**

Let that sink in for a moment. Jesus came back for *one* person. He had plenty to do. Yet Jesus made time to come back for Thomas.

How awesome is that.

Christ wants a relationship with every individual. You. Me. So that we, too, can say those profound words, “My Lord, my God” and realize they are true for us, too.

Our God is the one who leaves the ninety-nine and comes back for the one. That is my God. That is your God.

Our Lord is the one who continues to show up and reveal himself. Again and again, he offers his wounded, living body to his children. So that we experience peace. That is my Lord. That is your Lord. [4]

Skeptic Thomas is met by his Risen Lord and God. That is the good news we need to hear. That Christ isn't absent from us but meets us wherever we are. Whether we are out in the open or locked behind locked doors, Christ meets us and offers us peace.

### **Move 5: Table**

This weekend, thirteen young people in our church will receive their First Communion. What a great witness for us and reminder of how pivotal the Table is for us.

At the Table is where the wounded Jesus encounters us. In the bread. In the wine. Jesus sets us free.

Every week, we bring our genuine, authentic selves up to the Table, and we leave knowing we belong. We matter. And that we are loved.

At the Table, we encounter the wounded, living Christ. Who renews us. Transforms us. And brings us peace to take on regular, daily life.

### **Move 6: Ben meeting me behind locked doors**

The wounded Christ again and again meets us and mends our personal wounds. So that we can find that needed peace to keep going and *be* in this earthly life.

There are lots of examples I could share that point to the wounded, living Christ meeting me and helping me through a wound. One in particular happened a few years ago.

Kate and I had been trying to get pregnant for about a year. Finally, Kate was pregnant, and we were so excited. At about twelve weeks, Kate had a miscarriage.

As you can imagine, we were both in a very dark place. I remember calling my family and crying with them. Telling them there's really nothing they could do. They lived in Illinois, and we were in Iowa. "We will get through this," I said.

After calling my family and Kate's family, I called Ben. I just needed to vent. Talk to someone how awful the situation was. And we cried over the phone. I thanked him for listening, and I thought that was it.

Later that evening, I heard a knock at my door. When I opened it, there was Ben. Unbeknownst to me, he decided to take two days off work, travel the four hours to Iowa, and spend time with Kate and me.

The first night we all stayed up and talked and cried. By the end of the second day, I found myself laughing and, by the time Ben left, I felt better. I didn't realize it, but I needed to talk it out. I needed to grieve. I needed to have someone not be afraid to embrace me in all that. Someone who would not tell me it was going to be alright. Someone who would sit with me in it.

I was like the disciples: Locked away. Lost. Angry. Fearful that might not be able to have another kid. Ben embodied Jesus. He offered me that much-needed peace. Entered in and restored my hope again. Helped me see. Helped me gain perspective that Christ was there.

Doubt and mess are a part of this life. They are a part of our faith journey. But the good news is God breaks through. Enters in and shows us in real, tangible ways he is with us.

We get to be a part of God's work. We get to be Bens. And we do so because we know we have a God who goes after the one. Who leaves the found and goes after the one lost.

Hear this again: The wounded, living Christ continues to reveal himself. Continues to show up. Whether it's clear to us or not, the Resurrected One is among us. Coming after us. More poignantly, coming after you. [5]

Christ reveals to us the truth—which “never was *something* to be believed but *someone* that makes believing possible.” [6]

Amen.

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### *Resources*

[1] Pape, Lance. “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), April 12, 2015.

[2] Pape, Lance. “Commentary on John 20:19-31,”

[3] Hogan, Lucy Lind. “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), April 15, 2012.

[4] Shore, Mary Hinkle. “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), April 8, 2018.

[5] Lewis, Karoline. “When Seeing is Believing,” [DearWorking Preacher](http://DearWorkingPreacher.com), [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), April 8, 2012.

[6] Karoline Lewis. “When Seeing is Believing.”

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### *Reflection Questions*

- How are doubt and questions a part of your faith walk?
- When have you encountered and experienced Christ?
- What does it mean to you that we worship a God who leaves the ninety-nine and comes after you?