

“St. Thomas the Scientist”

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John 20:19-31 19 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." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 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." 26 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." 27 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." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 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." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 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.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love. Amen.

St. Thomas the Scientist. A Saints’ Day by that name is not on our calendar, but sometimes I think it should be.

Thomas is a saint, and his day on the Church year calendar is Dec. 21 where it says simply: St. Thomas, Apostle.

So this is a sermon about St. Thomas and science and the resurrection of our Lord.

We just heard again the story of “doubting Thomas”, and we know it quite well -- how can we make his story come alive in our own life stories this week?

Keep that question in mind, if you will, as we move into his story.

The other evening as Ruth & I sat together reading, she quoted something to me from her book -- as we are apt to do now and then -- a quote I’d like you to hear.

It’s from a man you’ve heard of, John Newton. Ring a bell? No?

He was the 18th C. slave trader turned priest of the Anglican Church who wrote.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

Here’s what Ruth quoted to me from that John Newton: “Preaching should break a hard heart and heal a broken one.”

And that reminded me of a saying I heard in seminary more than 50 years ago, “A pastor’s job is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.”

So my second question today is: What is there about the Easter story of Thomas that should afflict us or break our hard hearts?

Do we have any hard hearts here today that need breaking, or are our hearts already broken and badly in need of healing?

I’m assuming that we all need both today, so let’s start, today, with our hard hearts:

Wherein, Part 1, We Need to Challenge Our False Gods

John Newton had false gods; so did Thomas the disciple; and very likely so do we.

For Newton his god was his ship and the money he could make by catching and selling people. He had a very hard heart.

For Thomas, his false god was Jesus! Ooooh -- could that be? Most likely.

He with the other disciples most likely felt like suckers -- believing in a Messiah who would roust out the Roman Army and set up the throne of David again.

Now Jesus was dead and all hope died. Jesus didn’t fix their problems!

What a fake! But they had a false picture of the Messiah promised by God.

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And our false gods? Maybe the same -- we try to follow Jesus by being humble and forgiving, but we get laughed at, and others take advantage of us.
Or we look at our lives after another Lenten fast and then Easter, and what has changed? God didn't fix what we wanted fixed.
God as the great trouble-shooter for our lives is an under-achiever to say the least.
Or maybe our picture of God needs to be challenged.

Furthermore, when we stay huddled within our own walls, we are like the disciples.
Notice v. 19, **“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,...”**
Fear! In fear of their lives! And fear lives in our hearts! Another false god!
But we don't especially care to notice that our hearts are the main places where any problem-fixing by Jesus should happen.
Like Thomas, we act like scientists and say, “Seeing is believing,” and our hearts get harder and more distrustful of God the longer He doesn't fix what we want fixed.
I repeat, our hearts get harder and more distrustful of God the longer we don't see fixed what we want fixed.

So “seeing is believing”, right? The world has had that motto for a long time.
Claudius Ptolemy (90–164 A.D.), who lived almost at the same time as Thomas, said that everything revolves around the earth. Well, it sure looked like that to him.
Was that good science? “Seeing is believing.”
Then Nickolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), a contemporary of M. Luther, said, no, we revolve around the sun, and when Galileo Galilei in Italy, later that same C., supported Copernicus, he was condemned as a heretic by the Church of Rome and sentenced to house arrest.
They all saw what they saw, and science has continued to get better and better.
E.g., take the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, Switzerland, a large circular tube 17 miles long underground, where a year ago last month nuclear scientists shot particles around that tube to see what would happen. *[Show pictures]*
But it was a Higgs boson that they wanted to see -- this is a mock-up of what they think they'll find. *[Show picture]*
Then they'll have answers! But are scientific answers the only valid ones today?

Before you say to yourselves, “Oh, no. We don't believe that,” I want you to consider this quote: “Science tends to separate knowledge from values and champions an understanding built upon only what it can ‘prove’ and this approach has led civilization into despair and hopelessness.” [Editorial re Why Religion Matters, Huston Smith; “JPCC”, Summer 2002, p. 106.]

‘Understanding,’ that is, how to figure out the meaning of life, using science as a metaphysic, a religion, has led to ‘despair and hopelessness’!
In the same editorial, Lutheran Chaplain Thurn calls that not just a way of thinking for post-modern man, but actually a religion.
The name of that religion? “Scientism” which says, only what we experience is true.
Please notice that “science” and “scientism” are two different things. Science is a proper way of studying God's creation and is a gift of God.
“Scientism” is a religion that pays homage to a false god -- a religion that believes only science has the answers -- a religion in competition with our holy faith!

St. Thomas had a scientific method -- his motto was also “seeing is believing.”
He said, when the others told him, “We have seen the Lord...”, **“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.” (v. 25)**
He had eye-witness testimony from ten men, but he had to see for himself. That's why we call him “Doubting Thomas,” and I call him “St. Thomas the Scientist.”

Now let me ask you, Is doubt a sin?
Certainly unbelief is -- not believing that Jesus could come back from being definitely dead and is now alive again is certainly a mortal sin.

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But doubt? It was Thomas' doubt that led to further proof of the resurrection.

Thomas was an agnostic until he stood in the presence of his living Lord.

Did he really reach out his finger and touch the nail prints? Did he really reach out and thrust his hand into Jesus' side? We don't know.

Most Biblical commentators think not.

But Thomas saw, and Jesus affirmed the scientific method of Thomas by inviting him to touch, and then Jesus admonished Thomas, **“Do not doubt but believe.” (v. 27)**

Doubt is not a sin.-- agnosticism can be a stepping stone on the way to saving faith -- but it is a dangerous stance in life.

An agnostic could be swayed by the religion of scientism, for example.

Thus our Lord's warning to Thomas, **“Do not doubt but believe,”** because the consequences for unbelief are eternal.

Therefore we must, **Part II. Abandon False Gods and Rely Upon the Gospel of Peace**

v. 26 ‘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.”

Through locked doors the Prince of Peace enters -- bringing peace.

The war between humankind and its Maker is ended. Jesus brings the peace treaty!

People will still rage against the Almighty, and they will still attack other humans, but wonder of wonders, there is forgiveness in that word “peace.”

The cross was the once & for all payment of the penalty for all our sins of running after false gods.

St. Paul puts it this way, Rm. 4:25-5:1 **“25He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. 1Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...”**

It is our faith in the resurrected Christ that brings us peace everlasting! What a gift!

So there stood Thomas the Scientist in that upper room with our Lord's admontion to believe.

Can we imagine that scene -- can we see the expression on Thomas' face change from doubt to certainty? **28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 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.”**

You and I have not seen with our physical eyes nor touched with our physical hands.

But “Doubting Thomas, Thomas the Scientist” helps us to know for a certainty that Christ is risen from the dead and is alive and present where two or three are gathered together in His name.

And when the Body and Blood of Christ are placed into our hands here at this Altar, we see only bread and wine.

But we by faith enter into the mystery of the sacrament, and our faith is strengthened, and we are blessed -- we who have not seen and yet have believed.

Just one more thing -- St. Thomas was a changed man. He became the apostle to the Parthians: present day Iran & Afghanistan, and then he went on to India.

There he established the Church but died a martyr's death at Madras.

Which raises the question, “To whom are we missionaries?”

Earlier I asked: How can we make this story come alive in our own life stories this week? We are the people living the Risen life of Christ -- let it show!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

S.D.g. -- The Rev. Dr. Donald Schedler, Ph.D., Chaplain, Snowline Hospice, Diamond Springs, CA.