

Wake
From Resurrection to Pentecost

Please bow your heads and join me in prayer.

Gracious Lord,

Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit,

That as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed,

We may hear with joy what you say to us today.

May the meditations of our hearts, and the words of my mouth be pleasing to you O Lord.

Amen.

Listen now to our Scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, verses 19 to 31.

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."

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send *you*."

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

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."

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."

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."

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

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."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

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."

God always blesses the reading and hearing of his Word.

Thanks be to God.

I remember very well when I first learned what it felt like to be doubted. My parents had taken my sister and me on a weekend vacation trip to the glamorous city of Cincinnati. We were on our way to the Cincinnati Zoo. My mother was pouring over the map opened in the front seat, and my dad was driving with great intensity, looking for street signs, and trying to follow my mother's instructions. All of a sudden, I saw a sign on a post that said "ZOO" with a big arrow.

I cried out excitedly from the back seat, "The zoo's that way! It's right back there Dad! You just passed it!"

Apparently my parents didn't give much credibility to my 10 year old directional expertise, and so they ignored my advice, and continued to wander around until we finally found the zoo. My father did have the grace to tell me that I was right after we got there, but I remember the helpless feeling of knowing that people I loved and trusted didn't believe me!

After reading this passage in John, we can imagine that Jesus must have felt pretty frustrated about not being believed. Over and over again, no one, especially not the disciples, seem to get what he's trying to help them understand.

Today's Scripture lesson is often referred to as the "Doubting Thomas" story, but most scholars agree that that title is misplaced. The passage tells of two encounters by the disciples with the risen Lord.

At first blush, it's hard not to wonder if there isn't something seriously wrong with Thomas. "How many times does this guy have to hear the news to believe it? Doesn't he trust his friends that they're telling the truth?" After all, we're talking about the Lord's disciples!

But if we think that Thomas is being criticized by Jesus in this passage, we'd be wrong and miss the point of this story. In short, to call Thomas the doubting disciple, is giving him a bad rap.

In John 20:19-31, there are three main characters: Jesus, Thomas and (pause) You. Each of us plays an important role, not only in this passage, but in the whole Gospel of John.

In verse 19, the disciples are meeting in the Upper Room behind locked doors. The doors are locked because frankly, they're terrified. They are known to be Jesus' close associates, and they are deathly afraid that they too will be arrested and killed. Apparently either they hadn't received, or just didn't believe Mary Magdalene's message that she'd seen and spoken with the Lord.

They think that their leader, the friend they loved, is dead. There is no victory, no Easter for these disciples—only grief.

But then, to their amazement, Jesus appears out of nowhere and greets them: "Peace be with you." He shows them his wounds, and then they recognize him and rejoice. But Thomas was missing for Jesus' visit, and so their joy can't really be complete says Scholar J. Ramsey Michaels.

When the disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord!" he is not impressed. That isn't enough for Thomas. Unless he can see the nail imprints, and put his hand in Jesus' side himself, "I will not believe," he says.

Although Thomas does look rather bad here, in reality, he is not alone in his skepticism. *All* the disciples had doubts about Jesus, because we see that just a week later, they're back in the Upper Room with the doors locked again, indicating that they are still afraid. Maybe they've convinced themselves that Jesus' appearance last week was an illusion or a ghost.

All we know is that their unbelief exists because nothing has changed. In order to be sent, to do their work and fulfill their mission, there can be no doubters in their midst.

So what can we find out from John about the character of Thomas? In Chapter 11 in the story of Lazarus, we see that Thomas is courageous. By this time in His ministry, Jesus is really starting to stir things up, and has come to the attention of the Jewish leaders. The disciples are afraid for him and no doubt for themselves.

When they hear that Jesus' friend Lazarus is ill in Bethany, they don't want him to go there, because they believe that the Jews will attack him. Jesus however is determined, because he knows he has work to do there, and because he deeply loves Lazarus and his sisters.

In verse 16, we hear that “Thomas who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (Verse 11:16 on screen) This is a brave man! He is willing to die with Jesus!

In John Chapter 14, we discover that Thomas is uncompromisingly honest. Jesus has just explained heaven to the disciples, and promised them that he will prepare a place for them, and return himself to take them there. (Verses 14:4-5 on screen) Jesus says, to wrap things up, “And, you know the way to the place where I am going.”

We can imagine the disciples all nodding their heads in understanding—of course we do Jesus—but did they really? I know that I’ve done that before, not wanting to look like *I’m* the only one in the group who doesn’t get it.

But Thomas refused to say that he understood when he didn’t, or say he believed when he didn’t. He was too honest for that. He is the only one of the disciples to raise his hand and honestly admit, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Thomas wanted things to be clear, and he wanted to be sure that he understood. There is something admirable about that. Theologian William Barclay says “There is more ultimate faith in the man who insists on being sure, than in the man who glibly repeats things which he has never thought out, and which he may not really believe. It is doubt like that, which in the end, arrives at certainty.”

I have to wonder, if Thomas were here today, if he might not be a good Presbyterian. This may surprise you, but Presbyterians have a reputation for being a bit reserved. We’re known to be cautious, and even to be a bit suspicious of claims of encounters with the divine, unless, of course they have been examined and verified by a committee or council.

So if someone walked into Church today, and announced with great conviction, they’d just talked with Jesus in the parking lot, we’d all be polite and nod our heads, but really, most of us (or maybe it’s just me!) would be really uncomfortable about such a statement. Most of us, even Christians other than Presbyterians, are not all that different from the disciples and Thomas. We’re wary of things that seem outrageous, or just too good to be true. “Really?” we think. We may want to believe, but we’re cautious.

And certainly, there can be no doubt that Thomas deeply loved Jesus—he was, after all, willing to die with him. His heart was broken at Jesus’ death. William Barclay suggests that Thomas may have wanted to be alone in his grief and despair, which is why he was not with the other disciples during Jesus’ first visit.

When the others told him what they had seen, Thomas absolutely refused to believe such a preposterous claim, risen from the dead? Only if he could see Jesus with his own eyes, and touch those wounds, would he believe.

And Jesus heard him. He heard those demands because he repeats Thomas' words back to him without prompting. Without judgment, Jesus meets his demands to overcome Thomas' unbelief, to bring him to certainty about who He is. "Do not doubt but believe," says Jesus. (pause)

"My Lord and My God!"

And so we learn one more thing about Thomas. There was nothing halfway about this guy. When he was certain, he was 100% in. He doubted, in order to become sure, and then his surrender was complete.

Thomas' faith is prized by Jesus, but he was given a choice—to continue in his doubts or believe. There could be no middle ground. Jesus is, or is not, the Son of God. Thomas could not fulfill the mission Jesus had given him, without his 100% certainty.

But Jesus did not ask Thomas to believe without verification. He offered Thomas exactly what he demanded, and he did so in grace and love.

C.S. Lewis is a more modern day example of someone who had difficulty believing. His journey to faith was long and challenging. He was a great intellectual, devoted to logic, philosophy, and atheism. But he was also a seeker, perhaps born of his long search for love and security after the loss of his mother as a child. God met Lewis on his' own grounds, in his intellectualism and in his reason, and on his own terms.

"I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out," said Lewis in his book Surprised by Joy. "Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets or even a suit of armor, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armor, or keep it on . . . I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein." ". . . I was to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer. He would not argue about it. He only said, "I am the Lord"; "I am that I am."

Several years ago, I was serving on a Great Banquet weekend as member of the Agape Team whose job it was to set up rooms, keep things neat, serve behind the scenes, and ensure that the guest's needs were being met. Guests were told to let the Team know if they had any requests over the weekend.

The first request from one particular guest, was for a pair of flip-flops, size 8, for the shower. We were delighted to serve, so we purchased them and left them on her bed.

The second request from the same woman, was for *Extra Strength* Excedrin. We had regular strength Excedrin, extra strength Tylenol, regular Tylenol, Advil, aspirin and any of a number of other pain relievers, but only Extra Strength Excedrin would do for her. No problem. Off to the store we went.

Her *third* request was for a brown belt, size 36. And on and on it went.

I must admit that our cheerfulness began to wane as the weekend progressed.

However, at the closing of the weekend, the guests were given an opportunity to share what the experience had meant to them. That very same young woman, got up to talk, and I was humbled and blown away by what she said.

“I have never in my life experienced God’s love before. I prayed but never felt that God heard me or answered my prayers. This weekend, everything I asked for appeared like magic on my bed. I finally believe that God really loves me.”

That young woman needed to experience God’s love in a very tangible way in order to believe.

PAUSE

So Thomas’ story isn’t really about doubt, it’s about faith.

Jesus’ act of grace, in meeting Thomas’ demands, leads to the most powerful and complete confession in the Gospel of John: “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas finally sees that God is fully revealed in Jesus. He believes. Jesus is the Word, the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

All the “signs” of the resurrection, the stone removed from the tomb, the strips of linen and burial cloths left behind, Mary’s encounter with the angels and Jesus, the meetings in the Upper Room, point to the truth of the resurrection: Jesus is God, the victor over death and the ruler of this world.

Jesus’ resurrection is the sign of our own resurrections. This is “the way” that Thomas asked Jesus about in Chapter 14. “How can we know the way?” Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

Thomas was certain of Jesus because he saw. The disciples finally believed because of what they saw. But what about us?

Besides Jesus, we're the stars of the Gospel of John. He's talking to us when he says: "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."

The eye witnesses to the truth of the Gospel, were nearly gone. John didn't want to lose the power of their witness. He was compelled to write to future seekers so that they too might believe. Phrased in a different way, verse 29 says, "Thomas, you needed the eyes of sight to make you believe; but the days will come when men and women will see with the eyes of faith and believe."

The eyes of faith lead us to believe what Jerry noted last week is simply outlandish—the resurrection and all its implications.

We believe because of faith, which is a gift of God.

John provides us with an accounting of the disciples' and followers' experiences, and he shares with us their humanity and their faith journeys: their fears, doubts, and ultimately their certainty, so that we too can come to know Jesus.

"When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart," we are assured in Jeremiah 29:13.

Whether you're an intellectual like C.S. Lewis, or a cautious, hard to convince Presbyterian, Jesus knows what you need for faith—just pray and ask. Like Thomas, you will find.

This passage invites us to explore our own faith. Have you ever asked yourself if you really believe? Or do you simply accept it without question because you've grown up in the church? Whether or not you believe in your heart that Jesus is who He says he is, is absolutely critical.

"Do not doubt, but believe."

And **if** we say we believe, what does that mean? To believe a preposterous Gospel, has implications for the way we think, how we live, what we do with our time and money, how we act and what we say. Believing can be dangerous to your status quo.

Jesus pronounces a blessing or beatitude on the Christians who believe the amazing truth. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus offers that blessing to you.

When Thomas and the disciples believed, everything changed for them. They no longer cowered behind locked doors. They lost their fear and became incredibly bold. They addressed

and challenged not only the Jews, but Roman authorities with confidence. They went way out of their comfort zones to strange places, and met new people. They continued Jesus' work, even when it cost them their lives.

And look what happened to C.S. Lewis! He became a great apologist, addressed millions of people through his radio addresses, and was the author of books that continue to inspire readers of all ages still today.

Jesus wants us to be certain, because it is our belief in who He is that empowers our passion and our commitment to establish His Church—to bring God's kingdom to the world, to fight against oppression, to establish justice, to feed those who are hungry, to heal those who are sick, to love.

On Good Friday, I attended the YMCA's annual Prayer Breakfast. The featured guest speaker was Sujo John.

Sujo was raised in a Christian home in India, but turned away from the Church because he thought it was irrelevant. But he was a seeker and explored Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions, looking to fill a hole in his heart.

He attended church at the insistence of his parents as an unbeliever, but then, he was introduced to the concept that Christian faith really wasn't about an institution, but about having a relationship with Jesus. He gave his life to Christ and eventually moved from India to New York City, 6 months before 9-11.

Sujo worked in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on the 81st floor, and his wife Mary, 4 months pregnant, worked in the South Tower. He recounted the horrors of that day. After climbing down stairs for 1 hour and 20 minutes, he left Tower One to look for Mary. He knelt at the corner of the building right before it collapsed, and invited people around him to pray and accept Jesus. At the end of his prayer, he was the only one still alive.

PAUSE

Following his and Mary's escapes, Sujo felt God calling him. Today he speaks across the world about his experiences, spreading Jesus' story of hope and faith. He has founded a mission to rehabilitate the victims of human trafficking in India and Eastern Europe.

During his talk, Sujo mentioned the disciple Thomas who is said to have traveled to India to spread the news of the Gospel. Two thousand year later, one of Thomas' churches touched this young man, and so the seeds of faith that he planted continue to bear fruit.

Jesus had a mission for Thomas and all the disciples. It was so important that he came back a second time to make sure that they all understood and were certain about who He was. There was no room for doubts in their work ahead. It would not be too difficult for that. They must be confident in their faith.

We might say that Easter for the disciples was today, one week later.

“My Lord and my God!” They got it!

We can learn some good things from this passage.

First, John says that we should be more like Thomas and not be afraid to raise our hands and ask questions about Scripture, about Jesus, or about our faith. You will certainly not be the first to ask them. Search for answers, talk to Bible teachers, take your pastor to lunch.

Asking questions is a good thing because finding answers through prayer and study, deepens our understanding and makes us ever more confident in our faith.

And, we can learn from this passage that Jesus meets us on our own terms when we earnestly seek him. You are important to Jesus, but he leaves the choice to believe up to you.

If you are a believer in the radical, bold and outrageous claims of the Gospels—Jesus is the Son of God, that he was resurrected from the dead—then you are the recipient of Jesus’ blessing. “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.”

“My Lord and My God!”

Thomas believed and helped set in motion the kingdom of God.

John wrote “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.”

“Do not doubt, but believe.”

Amen