

The Resurrection of Thomas

Acts 4:32-35 CEB ³² The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. ³³ The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. ³⁴ There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, ³⁵ and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

John 20:19-31 CEB It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." ²² Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." ²⁶ After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you."

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" ²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." ³⁰ Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

The Resurrection of Thomas

Today, we pick up where we left off last Sunday. Last week we read how Mary Magdalene found Jesus in the garden on that first Easter morning and learned that he was raised to new life. Peter and another disciple, described as the one whom Jesus loved, went to the tomb and saw the burial cloths lying there, but we're told that they didn't yet understand that Jesus must rise from the dead. All four gospel writers say that the disciples had a hard time accepting the resurrection. Matthew says that the eleven remaining disciples met Jesus on a mountain in Galilee where they worshipped him – but some doubted. Mark says that the disciples didn't believe that Mary had seen Jesus. Luke tells us that the disciples refused to believe several women who said Jesus was raised from the dead. Even when Jesus appeared to the disciples, they thought he was a ghost, Luke says.

The meetings with Jesus after the resurrection have unusual qualities. Sometimes his disciples don't recognize him at first. Sometimes, even though they recognize him, they don't believe their eyes. Sometimes he just appears in a closed room, and sometimes he just disappears from view. The appearances of Jesus seem both ethereal and real. There's a paradox of Christ appearing (and disappearing) at will without regard to physical limitations, yet also establishing his bodily reality by showing his wounds, inviting touch, and eating with his followers.

In today's account in John, when Jesus appears to the assembled disciples, the first thing he does is say, "Peace be with you." How extraordinary that is! He doesn't ask them where they ran off to on Thursday night. He doesn't ask them why they didn't stand close and offer love and comfort while he hung on a cross on Friday. No, despite what they have done – and failed to do – he offers them peace.

Then he shows them his hands and side, and when they realize that it is really him, they rejoice! Jesus tells them that he was sent by the Father. John tells us this forty-one times in his gospel and here it is emphasized again. John wants us to really hear that Jesus was sent to reveal the Father, to teach, and to gather disciples.

Then Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit. A change in their status takes place. They have been disciples, that is, followers and students. Now, Jesus sends them out, and the term for one who is sent out is apostle. They're given authority to forgive and retain sins AFTER they have received the Holy Spirit. I think that it's important that they must first be filled with the Spirit, have the mind of Christ, if you will, before they're given that authority.

Now we're told that Thomas wasn't present when Jesus appeared this time. When Thomas turns up later, he refuses to believe his friends and says he'll believe Jesus is resurrected when he can touch his warm wounded body.

And so we have labeled him for all time as Doubting Thomas. The connotation is that Thomas is inferior in faith, deficient in dedication, an object lesson for the rest of us to avoid. We tend to put Thomas down. We believe – what's wrong with him? And we thank God that we aren't like Thomas. Well, it's time to resurrect Thomas, time to resurrect his reputation. When we read the story carefully, we see that Thomas asks for no more than what the other disciples had already received. Just as they didn't trust Mary Magdalene's testimony, neither does Thomas trust theirs.

Eight days later, Jesus appears to the group again. After Jesus' first visit, after being given the Holy Spirit, and commissioned to go, the disciples are still huddled in insecurity behind locked doors, and they get an undeserved second visit. This story illustrates once more how God keeps coming to us, wherever we might be. Jesus didn't make an example of them. He didn't lecture them, He doesn't criticize Thomas for wanting proof. This is a story of grace, about how Jesus pursues his disciples, patiently seeking them out and encouraging them again and again. And Jesus is determined to reach the skeptical Thomas who refuses to believe his friends, just as they didn't believe Mary Magdalene. Thomas doesn't deserve to be called Doubting Thomas. His doubts are no different than those of the other disciples.

We aren't told whether Thomas touches the wounds after being invited to do so. But we are told that he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" This is the highest praise and strongest declaration about Jesus in the scriptures.

It's been suggested that there's a little bit of Thomas in some of us, a tendency to resist easy answers to hard questions of faith, an itch to want a deeper and more complete understanding. I hope that's true. Doubt is sometimes described as "the dark night of the soul." Often, in the shadow of unbelief, a stronger faith germinates to replace a shaky and ill-considered previous belief structure. A faith that hasn't been examined is often at risk of being shattered when confronted with hard questions and traumatic events.

Have you ever wished that you could have been there to see and hear Jesus? Have you day dreamed about what it would have been like to hear him preaching the Sermon on the Mount? Or, what it would have been like to eat a breakfast that he had cooked on the shore of Lake Galilee? And perhaps you think, "If I'd been there, I would never have had little uncertainties about my faith." Faith is not a certainty based on physical perception. Certainty because of what you have heard and seen in person is not faith. Faith is trust, trust grounded in insight into the reality of God. The author of Hebrews says, ^{RSV} **Hebrews 11:1** "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who don't see and yet believe." That isn't a put down on Thomas and the rest of the disciples. It's a blessing on all who come to

belief and faith without the opportunity to experience Jesus directly. That includes many of the disciples then and every follower of Christ in the centuries since then.

We aren't so very different from those early disciples. Like Thomas, like the disciples, like the two people walking to Emmaus, we may not recognize Jesus when he is right in front of us. He might come to us in a bright "Aha" moment, or as a beggar in rags, or as a wise old grandmother who simply holds us as we weep. But we fail to see the expression of Christ's love or hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit because we don't expect it.

Like the disciples huddled together in a locked room, the church – that's us – is chronically tempted to stay behind closed doors. Outside are the political, economic, civic, and family realities that cry out for God's love, but we're uncomfortable taking our faith into the "real" world. That would mean risking disapproval. We might be made fun of. We might make people uncomfortable. We'd lose the safety of anonymity.

Sometimes we toss around the expression "C and E Christians." Those who come to worship fairly regularly note that some folks tend to show up for worship around Christmas and Easter. Those who worship more often feel better about themselves because they aren't "C and E Christians." But the truth is that we all tend to be "C and E Christians." The church calendar provides Advent and Lent, seasons to be devoted to preparing for Christmas and Easter. Many of us have recited the Apostles' Creed year after year, a declaration that two of the most important points of our faith are belief in Christmas and Easter, with no mention of the life Jesus led or his teachings.

So, how and why do we, who have not seen, come to believe? Today's passage from Acts tells us that the disciples didn't remain huddled in a little tight mass. They did change from being disciples to being apostles, those who were sent out. William Willimon has said that, "The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history."¹ This was their witness to the resurrection. They were a resurrected people. Their motivation wasn't fear of Hell, but rejoicing in the good news of Jesus Christ!

Thomas and all of the disciples lived as resurrected people. They loved their neighbors as themselves. This was a community where life for everyone was sustained. Resurrection was obviously not just about praise; it was about the economic structure of community. When occasions of need arose, those who owned lands would sell them and share generously. They were resurrected from their own tombs of fear, tombs of being trapped by insecurity and focusing on their own life and needs. They were released to see others as brothers and sisters, true kinfolk, with strong family ties. Their world view changed from self-preservation to community well-being. Their lives were changed and their very lives were a testimony of the good news of Jesus Christ. And that was so radical, so loving, that others could not but take notice. Their task, and our call, is to live resurrected lives, lives so transformed that others will see Jesus in us. How, then, shall we live? Amen.

Don't be afraid of doubts;
Let them lead you to deep understanding and stronger faith.
Like those early disciples,
Go forth and live resurrected lives!

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1988) p 51