

ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REV. JIM CAPPS- APRIL 29, 2012

"THOMAS ENCOUNTERS THE RISEN LORD"

JOHN 20:24-29

Today, as we continue this series, "Basking in Resurrection Light," we are going to be looking at one of the best known of the disciples. He's well-known because of the way he's put together and thinks. Today, he would probably be a scientist, accountant or engineer, all people we value highly because of their orderly way of processing facts and figures. Of course, we are looking at Thomas. Thomas has become synonymous with what kind of thinking? You guessed if you answered "doubting."

Last Sunday at the beginning of our Youth Hour, they were asked the question, "What do you doubt about Christianity or your faith." How would you answer that question? Here are some of their answers:

- "Sometimes I doubt that God can truly love me."
- "I doubt about predestination- the proof behind it... is there any?"
- "That I am giving enough"
- "Certain aspects about God's character"
- "That God would forgive me for everything I do"
- "There are so many other religions, how do we know that ours is the real and the right one."
- "I doubt whether God has a plan for me."
- "Creation, Genesis"
- "What happens when we die?"
- "Justice"
- "I worry most about God taking care of my future."
- "I doubt if He (God) is really with me when I don't feel Him all the time."

As we consider our own doubts, let's look together at Thomas' encounter with the Risen Lord.

Read John 20:24-29.

IN VERSES 24-25, WE DISCOVER THOMAS WAS NOT WITH THE OTHER DISCIPLES WHEN THE RISEN LORD CAME AND STOOD AMONG THEM ON THAT FIRST EASTER EVENING.

We aren't told why Thomas was absent for **that momentous meeting. There have been several conjectures.**

- **He may have been out securing groceries for the others.**
- **Maybe he believed in Jesus so much that he was so broken-hearted that he could not meet the eyes of the others. He needed some alone time for his grief.**

- Possibly Thomas was loyal, yet somewhat unimaginative, and would only act on something about which he was certain. The death of Jesus was so overwhelming that he just had to be alone to process and come to grips with it.
- Still another theory is that Thomas was hiding in fear and gone off to brood over the seeming failure of Jesus' mission, maybe even turning back to his old ways.

While we don't know exactly why he wasn't present, we do know that Thomas missed the encounter with the Risen Christ by the other disciples. Their radiant joy must have made him feel more disconnected than ever.

Dear friends, in all the seasons of our lives we need to be connected to the community of faith. More than filling the plate or filling the pew, the community of faith experiences life with us. They are the Body of Christ present with us in times of celebration and joy as well as during the most difficult and devastating events.

When the community of faith is authentic, they are there as we process our deepest fears; go through our most extreme losses; suffer the consequences of our worst mistakes; and grapple with troubling doubts. Sometimes those doubts are directed toward others. Sometimes we doubt ourselves. If we are honest there are times when our doubts are directed toward God.

Do you feel separated from the community of faith today? Are you in a season of grappling with doubts?

THOMAS NEEDED TANGIBLE EVIDENCE OF JESUS' RESURRECTION.

While the other disciple may have been well-meaning, Thomas felt that he needed much more than they were giving him if he was going to believe them. Anything less was wishful thinking on their parts.

While not the popular thing to do, Thomas presents an ultimatum to the disciples: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." This was the very evidence that Jesus had offered to His disciple in their first encounter with Him.

The disciples are neither surprised nor squelched. This was the way Thomas was wired. They knew him well and had come to appreciate his outlook on life. He would always need tangible proof.

My experience with people like Thomas is that they don't necessarily want to be that way. They just can't believe unless all the dots are connected. **Honest doubting can lead us to a deeper, greater faith.**

When he was becoming a Jesuit priest, author and speaker, John Powell, writes about going through a season of serious doubting. Finally, in a wonderful way, God broke through to him. Listen to his reflections on the experience:

"I had to experience four months of the hollowing out before the grace of God could repose in its place, in the emptiness that had been created by God's absence and by my

doubts. When I read that doubt eats away old forms of faith, so that new and deeper ones can be born in us—I truly believe it.”

So it was for Thomas.

A WEEK LATER, THOMAS ENCOUNTERED THE RISEN LORD.

I picture that encounter like this. A week after Easter, Jesus once again appears to the disciples and this time Thomas is present. He begins with the same words as a week earlier, “Peace be with you! Shalom!” When Thomas sees Him, I imagine him saying to himself, “Oh no! I did it again! How could I be so foolish?” In my mind’s eye, I see Thomas kind of quietly fading over to a corner, hopefully, out of Jesus’ sight.

Then I envision Jesus walking right through the others and focusing His complete attention on Thomas, who seems visibly embarrassed. Jesus not only met him where he was, but He treated Thomas with great respect. He reaches out His hands toward Thomas and says, “If this is the evidence you need, here, see and touch for yourself. Stop doubting and believe.”

With that Thomas falls on his knees before Jesus and blurts out a statement of belief, “My Lord and my God.” You have to give Thomas lots of credit, once he had the evidence he needed, he wholeheartedly states his belief in the Risen Lord who had taken him seriously, treating him with respect.

Then Jesus responds with a statement that includes you and me today, “Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” That’s us dear friends.

Once Thomas believed, he served the Risen Lord faithfully, using the specific gifts God had given him. Tradition says that Thomas felt called by God to go to India where He faithfully shared the good news of Jesus Christ. People experienced the Risen Christ, as they came in contact with Thomas. Tradition goes on to say that Thomas believed in the Risen Christ so much that he was willing to put his life on the line and was martyred.

I praise God for the example of Thomas!

APPLICATION

On this Volunteer Expo Sunday, the example of Thomas and the last words of Jesus in today’s reading are powerful to me.

When encountered by the Risen Lord, Thomas moved from sincere doubting to self-surrendering service for the cause of Christ. Maybe you’re going to through a season of doubting and you can’t imagine being able to be used by God in the future. Like Thomas bring your doubts by name to Jesus today. Frankly, He knows them anyway and He is big enough to handle them. Take heart, our doubts can be a prelude to a deeper, more authentic faith than you ever imagined.

I love the story told by Gardner Taylor, a much-loved African American pastor from New York City. He tells of a situation at the beginning of his ministry when he was preaching in in rural Louisiana during the Depression. Electricity had just come to that part of the country and the little black church in

which he was preaching just had one light bulb hanging down from the ceiling. He was preaching away when in the middle of his sermon, all of the sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black and Dr. Taylor, being inexperienced, stumbled around and didn't know what to say. Finally, an elderly deacon sitting in the back of the church cried out, "Preach on, Preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!"

Dear friends, in the midst of the darkness of doubt, keep searching for Jesus, He can come to you just like He did to Thomas. By the way, Jesus can still see you no matter how dark your doubt may be.

I'm also moved by Jesus' words to Thomas after his faith statement, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Could it be that people in our day and age, who don't see Jesus in the same way Thomas did, believe when they see Jesus in us, the Body of Christ? Just as Thomas needed tangible evidence, as we empty ourselves in loving service, we become the hands of Jesus for our world to see and touch.

If you are not already doing so, I challenge you to go to our Volunteer Expo today and prayerfully look for ways that you might be able to use the particular gifts, abilities, and interests God has given you, to be Christ's tangible presence to others.

Frankly, I wouldn't be standing here today, talking about Thomas, if it weren't for people who drove a bus, helped me go to camp, taught Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, helped me make it through 9 years of preparation for ministry. Pray for a focused place to which you commit for a year and experience the joy of being invested in what God is doing not only here at ZPC but in our community, country and world.

It's as we are serving side by side with other parts of the Body of Christ that we experience the joy and significance of fellowship and community. As was true for Thomas, particularly when we are in a season of questioning, we need to be present with and not apart from the family of faith.

San Antonio pastor and author, Max Lucado, has a handle on this when he writes:

"Questions can make hermits out of us, driving us into hiding. Yet the cave has no answers. Christ distributes courage through community; He dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess and pray, Christ speaks."

May God help each one of us find at least one place to feel like we are part of the Body of Christ as we serve the Risen Lord by serving others.