

“Peace Be With You”
John 20:19-31
Sunday, April 3, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Joanne Hinch of Woodland Hills, California, on the day before Easter, was sitting at the kitchen table coloring eggs with her three-year-old son, Dan, and her two-year-old daughter, Debbie. She told her kids about the meaning of Easter and taught them the traditional Easter morning greeting and response, ‘He is risen...He is risen indeed!’ The children planned to surprise their Dad, a Presbyterian minister, with that greeting as soon as he awoke the next morning. Easter arrived, little Dan heard his father stirring about in his bedroom, so the boy got up quickly, dashed down the hall and shouted the good news: ‘Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, God’s back!’” (David E. Leininger)

Thomas, one of Jesus’ faithful disciples, does not greet the first Easter morning with little Dan’s level of certainty. Thomas has witnessed Jesus rise to a place where crowds love him and clamor for him. And then, in the end, he has seen Jesus crucified as a criminal.

No wonder Thomas has doubts. No wonder Thomas wavers between fear and hope; belief and cynicism.

Earlier in John’s gospel, Thomas comes across as much more of a believer.

I. Thomas, the insightful student of theology.

In John’s first reference to Thomas, the disciple acts with courageous devotion. Chapter 11 verse 16 shows his great love for Lazarus, one of Jesus’ closest friends. When Jesus wants to go to see Lazarus, who has died, Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Thomas joins Jesus in his grief.

The symbolism of John's gospel also suggests that Thomas is literally ready to die with Lazarus. And, since the story of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection, the implication is that Thomas is also ready to die with Jesus.

In John's second reference to Thomas, the disciple is shown to be theologically alert. He is able to discuss the faith with Jesus. John 14:3-5 begins with Jesus saying, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas replies, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas' genuine question allows Jesus to teach the disciples further, saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." One role Thomas plays among the disciples is that of asking insightful theological questions.

In addition to these biblical accounts of Thomas, he is also remembered as the supposed author of the Gospel of Thomas. This is a non-biblical account of some of the sayings of Jesus. And many scholars credit Thomas with the earliest Christian mission to India. Finally, Thomas declares that Jesus is, "My Lord and my God." Nowhere else in scripture is Jesus so directly addressed as "God."

Dorothy Sayers comments: "It is unexpected, but extraordinarily convincing, that the one absolutely unequivocal statement in the whole gospel of the Divinity of Jesus should come from Doubting Thomas. It is the only place where the word God is used without qualification of any kind, and in the most unambiguous form of words. And he does not say it ecstatically, or with a cry of astonishment but with flat conviction, as of one acknowledging irrefutable evidence that $2 + 2 = 4$, that the sun is in the sky. Thomas says, you are my Lord and my God!"

Even with all these positive reports, the label “Doubting Thomas” still sticks. He is compared to the beloved disciple who believes upon seeing the empty tomb. And to Mary Magdalene who believes upon hearing her name spoken. And to the other disciples who believe upon seeing the risen Christ.

Unlike them, Thomas must touch Jesus in order to believe. Or at least this is what he thinks. The biblical account never says that he actually does touch Jesus before proclaiming his faith. But just the fact that he demands that kind of proof has won him the title of “Doubting Thomas.”

Maybe in spite of Doubting Thomas’s tarnished reputation he can show us some ways to be curious, insightful, and daring in our Christian adventure.

II. Thomas, the doubtful, fearful, responsible disciple,

For one thing, the story of Thomas is a word of grace for us. Christians often have doubts, and sometimes we feel anxious or guilty about this. If we had real faith, we would never doubt -- or at least this is how we feel. Intellectually, we may know this isn’t true; but deep down in our guts, we fear that it is.

To know that one of the disciples, who saw Jesus face-to-face and lived with him for three years, also had doubts and yet finally believed is reassuring. Because Thomas doubted, we can better accept our own times of doubt. We don’t have to leave the church because we have questions. We don’t have to hide our doubts from other Christians who seem to have stronger faith than we do. We can proclaim our doubts to one another as Thomas proclaimed his doubts to the other disciples. By acknowledging our doubts we can help others to clarify and strengthen their beliefs. And we can leave it up to God to confirm our faith at crucial moments of need.

Writes one scholar:

“Doubt is not the opposite of Faith, but a part of it. As the poet Tennyson put it: ‘There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds.’ It is significant that the English word ‘belief’ is related to the word ‘love.’ Originally, the things that people ‘believed’ were what they held ‘beloved.’ For too long the dogmas and doctrines of the Church have effectively locked the doors to keep out the doubters. Thomas’s doubt is not non-belief in some credal statement or other, but a lack of confidence to trust in the present reality of the Love of God.” (Keith Whyte)

Francis Bacon has this to say on the topic of doubt: “If a man will begin in certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.”

Our doubts can lead us to dig deeper. In science, we conduct further experiments. In the church, we pray, we meditate, we study the scriptures, we consult with other Christians, we act on our faith, and we see where it takes us. Doubt can be a form of humility; we allow ourselves to admit that we don’t know it all; we don’t have all the answers. This leaves space for God’s truth to enter in.

Allowing for that space can be scary.

The story of Thomas contains some good reasons for Thomas to be fearful. Jesus is dead. Thomas’s hero has been martyred. The society is against him and the other disciples.

Grief makes belief extremely difficult. Thomas is focused on the death of his friend and leader. He is unable to accept the ray of hope that the resurrection offers.

And if -- by some crazy miracle! -- the resurrection is true, then Thomas has a huge responsibility to fulfill. Jesus died and was raised. Christians through baptism die to their old lives and are raised with Christ into newness of life. Fear on Thomas’s part is understandable. If the resurrection is true, nothing is the same. If the resurrection is true, his life will be more

difficult, more demanding. If the resurrection is true, Thomas must take up his cross and follow Jesus. If, on the other hand, the resurrection is not true, then he can retreat into a safe, quiet grief.

Christian responsibility. It means many changes in Thomas's life. No wonder he has doubts and fears. No wonder Thomas wants proof of the resurrection before he will take action.

III. Thomas, the Holy Spirit-filled proclaimer of the gospel.

Ultimately, the story of Thomas shows how proof and power come to Christians. It doesn't come through touching the hands and the feet and the side of the resurrected body of Jesus. At the same time, it does begin with the acknowledgement of a physical truth – that Jesus did suffer and die for us on the cross. We see and we grieve the nails in his hands and feet, the spear-gash in his side. Thomas sees and acknowledges the reality of Jesus' suffering.

We must acknowledge the sacrifice that has been made for us.

But the full proof and power comes when God sends the Holy Spirit to convince hearts and to empower action. "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,'" (vv. 21-22).

This is John's version of the Pentecost story. Before the Holy Spirit comes, Thomas and the other disciples see Jesus. They live with Jesus, day after day, but they do not understand. They do not truly see him. They do not truly believe in him. They have not received peace and power through his Holy Spirit. They pass on the stories that will become the biblical accounts of Jesus' life; but they do not preach the gospel.

After the Holy Spirit comes, Thomas and the disciples receive the peace of Christ in their hearts. Through the grace of God they receive the power to boldly preach the gospel.

That same Holy Spirit is available to us today.

The story is told that, “Every Sunday morning, the people of a church in the Pacific Northwest say, ‘Peace be with you.’ They begin the worship service with a hymn of praise. The people confess their sins together, and hear of God’s forgiveness. Then they are invited to turn to others around them and pass the peace. It has become an exuberant moment in an otherwise sober occasion. Friends leave their pews to embrace one another. Newcomers are warmly welcomed with a kind word or a hug.

“Nobody thought much about the weekly ritual until the pastor received a letter from a man who had recently joined the congregation. The new member was a promising young lawyer from a prestigious downtown law firm. He drafted a brief but pointed letter on his firm’s letterhead. ‘I am writing to complain about the congregational ritual known as ‘passing the peace,’ he wrote. ‘I disagree with it, both personally and professionally, and I am prepared to take legal action to cause this practice to cease.’ When the pastor phoned to talk with the lawyer about the letter, he asked why the man was so disturbed. The lawyer said, ‘The passing of the peace is an invasion of my privacy.’”

One scholar comments: “Perhaps that story could only happen in our politically correct times. These are strange days. I have no doubt,” Carter comments, “that there are people who would take their church to court if too many people shook their hands, or if neighbors were too friendly, or if fellow pew-sitters interrupted their private little religious moments. To that end, I think the pastor’s response to the lawyer was right on target. He said, ‘Like it or not, when you joined the church you gave up some of your privacy, for we believe in a risen Lord who will

never leave us alone.’ Then he added, ‘You never know when Jesus Christ will intrude on us with a word of peace.’” (William G. Carter)

Closing.

The story of Thomas calls us to responsibility, to new life, to the preaching of the gospel. But that call is surrounded with grace – grace that understands and forgives our doubts, grace that says, “Peace be with you,” grace that sends the Holy Spirit to convince and to empower. Jesus says to Thomas, with love, “Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas responds, “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas finally sees with his heart, believing without the need to touch Jesus. A deeply joyful surprise for skeptical Thomas. A legacy of grace and peace for all of us Doubting Thomases down through the ages.

“Through believing,” may you “have life in his name,” (v. 31).

Amen.