

Easter 2            April 19, 2009  
Calvary Presbyterian Church  
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Psalm 118: 14-29  
John 20: 19-29

Let us pray: Merciful God, who rolled the stone away and called Jesus from death to life, remove the stones that we have set before the entrance to our understanding—stones of skepticism that keep us from trust, stones of selfishness that prevent us from hearing others, stones of preoccupation that trap us within ourselves. Remove each one of them, O Lord, and call us to life, that we might hear the Good News and believe. Amen.

This is my favorite Sunday of the year. It's not that I don't love all the excitement of the Easter celebration—nothing could make me happier than filling up this old sanctuary every Sunday of the year—but, after the glorious excesses of alleluias and visitors on Easter morning, most churches will have the smallest attendance of the year this week. In the Church of Scotland it used to be officially designated as "Low Sunday." This is the gathering of the faithful; the ones who bought the flowers and cut up the bread and vacuumed up the confetti and who continue to pay the bills and organize the many small tasks that hold the church together so that it will be here to preach the good news to the crowds whenever they might decide to come back. You are the ones who know that the empty tomb is only the beginning of the story, and are willing to keep listening.

Hear the Word of the Lord from the Gospel according to John. (Reading John 1:1) "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." No, wait, that's the beginning of this Gospel, the lectionary for today is not the beginning, but the end of the story. Please turn with me to John 20:19-29. (It's page 115 in the pew bibles.)

It is now evening on that first Easter. Peter and the other disciple have found the tomb empty, and Mary Magdalene has already announced to them, "I have seen the Lord!" But still, we find the disciples huddled together behind locked doors:

### Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

Everyone my age remembers where we were on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November in 1963. We spent days glued to our black and white television screens unwilling to believe the news that was coming to us from Dallas. We could not believe it was possible to assassinate a president of the United States—especially this young and exceedingly popular president. More than 40 years after the event, I read in the *Post* that the quarterly journal of the **British Forensic Science Society**, had just announced that their new study of the audiotapes of the **Kennedy Assassination**, using the most modern digital sound equipment available has proved beyond a reasonable doubt that

there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll after all.<sup>1</sup> Last May, an FBI metallurgist and Texas A&M pronounced the evidence used to rule out a second assassin was fundamentally flawed, but couldn't say for sure how many bullets were present in the five fragments that have been preserved.<sup>2</sup> **The Warren Commission**, appointed less than a week after the assassination, spent ten months and took 26 volumes of testimony from 552 witnesses, found no evidence of a second gunman. Fifteen years after that, a **House Assassination Committee** decided to review the evidence again. They worked for two years and concluded that the murder in Dallas was "probably the result of a conspiracy." After that, the **National Academy of Sciences** did their own study. Led by a physicist from Harvard, they studied the grainy home movie from the only one in the crowd who had a camera trained on the motorcade, (Can you remember such a primitive time, when only one person in the crowd would have had a camera?) They studied that Zabruder film frame by frame and concluded that there were only three gunshots—all from direction of Lee Harvey Oswald's perch in the Texas Schoolbook Depository. We still can't believe that anyone could assassinate the president of the United States. Every bookstore still has a whole shelf of books to choose from on the subject. Oliver Stone made that documentary-style movie about it all and confused me so much that I can't sort out what I thought I remembered from what he made up. But that newspaper article back in 2001 grabbed my attention, not so much because of the subject matter, but because the author of the British study was a man named, **D.B. Thomas**.

Odd, that he should be such a precise namesake for our cultural cliché for skepticism, that Doubting Thomas from the New Testament. Each one of the gospels carefully mentions that there continued to be some doubters among the community after the Resurrection appearances, but only the Gospel of John gives that idea substance by embodying it in the person of one of the Disciples. Thomas is on each one of the lists of the disciples—smack dab in the middle every time—but only in this fourth gospel do we get to know anything at all about him. He actually gets lines to say in this gospel—and great lines at that. (This author carefully tells us his name means "The Twin." Three of the four times he is mentioned, the author makes sure his Greek readers will know that the Aramaic name, Thomas, means "The Twin," *Didymus*, in Greek. There has been a lot of conjecture about exactly what that might have meant—some have suggested that perhaps he looked like Jesus and they were sometimes mistaken for each other. Or maybe he just was a twin—with a sibling either among the 12, or not.)

When Jesus announces to the disciples that he is going to leave the relative safety of the region beyond the Jordan and go back to see his friends—Mary and Martha, who are grieving for their dead brother Lazarus, in the village of Bethany—very near Jerusalem, and very near those dangerous Priests and Pharisees—it's Thomas who recognizes the immanent danger and says to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16).

And, at that dinner in the upper room, it's Thomas, who asks the question I hope I would have been brave enough to ask, when he says, "No, Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5).

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<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post*, Monday, March 26, 2001, A-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Washington Post*, Thursday, May 17, 2007, A-3.

Only in the gospel reading for today is Thomas, everywhere else clearly the realist, shown to be also Thomas, the doubter. This is the Gospel lesson for **every** year on the second Sunday of the Easter season. It's a lesson that the Easter visitors probably need to hear at least as much as the story of the empty tomb; but clearly the church understands that this is a story that the most faithful—the congregation gathered on “Low Sunday”—will need to hear every year, over and over again.

The story is composed in two neatly parallel scenes, and nearly every line fulfills one of the promises that Jesus had made to the disciples at dinner on their last night together. It begins by telling us, it was evening on THAT day—a phrase that the Hebrew Scriptures used to talk about the future expectation for the time when God's kingdom would finally come. At the Last Supper, Jesus had said, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me...on THAT day you will know that I am in my Father” (14:18-20).

The disciples were gathered—and we don't know exactly who was there, John uses the “disciple” word fairly loosely throughout this gospel, not always referring just to the twelve—and they had bolted the door out of fear of the political authorities. Were they afraid they too would be executed just for being followers of Jesus? Or, were they afraid because Peter and John had found the tomb empty that morning and they didn't know what that meant? Who could believe a crying, hysterical woman who said she had seen the Lord? Or, **did** they believe her and were they afraid if Jesus was alive, he had every reason to be furious with them for deserting and abandoning him? They couldn't stay awake to pray with him. They hadn't believed anything that he had told them? There are lots of possibilities.... However it was, they were gathered up there in **fear**, and Jesus came and stood among them. The gospel writer shows absolutely no interest in how it happens. Jesus is just there. His greeting is both ordinary; the normal salutation of greeting. “Shalom, my friends.” And yet it is also deeply profound. It is what he had promised at that Last Supper when he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid” (14:27). And then it also says the disciples rejoiced. Jesus had said to them, “Truly, truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn...you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy...I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice” (16:20-22). Don't you remember?

The connection to the next scene tells us that Thomas wasn't with them on that night. (Don't you wonder where he was? Doesn't it tell us that we should never miss a gathering of the community because you never know when something marvelous will happen and you might miss it!<sup>3</sup>) And the other disciples said to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” And just as they themselves hadn't believed because Mary Magdalene came to them on Easter morning and announced, “I have seen the Lord!” Thomas says, unless I see for myself, I will not believe. Actually, he doesn't say just “see” for myself, he says unless his fingers can touch the holes that the nails had made—did you realize this is the only place in any of the passion narratives that we get a reference to “nails”—and unless he can touch those holes, and thrust his whole hand into that gaping wound in Jesus' side, the very place where the Roman soldier had pushed the violence of our world right inside the body of Jesus, Thomas will not believe.

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<sup>3</sup> Witherington, Ben III, *John's Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

And the next week, Jesus comes to them again. And those doors are still shut, but it doesn't say they were locked, and it doesn't say they were afraid. Jesus greets them with the same, "Peace be with you!" And he reaches out to Thomas, who was with them this time, and invites him to "Put your finger here....stick your hand into my side." The Risen Christ is willing to do whatever is necessary for Thomas to stop being unbelieving and begin to be believing. (That's a closer translation of the tense of the Greek participles in that verse.) Stop being unbelieving and begin to be believing.

And then Thomas gets the very best line that any of the supporting players in this drama ever get. Since the beginning, this gospel writer has been piling up an avalanche of titles for Jesus—prophet, Messiah, Elijah, Son of Joseph, Son of Man, Holy One, Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, Anointed One, King of Israel; but Thomas finally puts all the pieces of the story together and can make the strongest confession in the whole bible,<sup>4</sup> when he says, "My Lord and my God." That was the beginning of this gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1), and finally it is Thomas, the doubter, who can say it completely and with full conviction for all of them, this was God who became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Did you notice that Thomas never did actually touch those wounds? He came to believe without as much proof as he thought that he needed. It wasn't that it wasn't offered. Jesus says, "Here friend Thomas, touch and believe." Jesus is willing to stand there and offer exactly what Thomas wants. Thomas, like us, was not there for the events of the first Easter. He heard the good news from his closest friends, but it wasn't enough. He still demanded to be satisfied, personally, on his own terms.

In Kathleen Norris' book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, she reminds us that at its Greek root, the verb "believe" simply means, "to give one's heart to." She recounts the beginnings of her faith journey with these words about her encounter with a Benedictine Monastery:

I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned with my weighty doubts and intellectual frustrations over Christianity. What interested them more was was my desire to come to worship. I was a bit disappointed—I had thought my doubts were spectacular obstacles to my faith and was confused but intrigued when an old monk blithely stated that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow...

I feel blessed to know from experience that it is in the act of worship, the act of saying and repeating the vocabulary of faith, that one can come to claim it. It is in acts of repetition that seem senseless to the rational mind that belief comes, doubts are put to rest and religion takes hold. And yet it is not mindless at all. It is head working inseparable from heart, whole body religion.... Fortunately, believing, like writing, is more process than product, and is not strictly speaking, a goal-oriented activity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Raymond, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 360.

<sup>5</sup> Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) 63-67.

Thomas raises the question for us. There was just not enough evidence for him to begin to be believing. 552 witness and 26 volumes of testimony and continuous scientific analysis of every scrap of evidence with the most modern equipment wouldn't do it either. Thomas needed to encounter the Risen Christ for himself.

In the last verse of this lesson, Jesus responds to Thomas with a blessing for us, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). God is still willing to stand here, among us, offering exactly what we need to move from being unbelieving to becoming believing. Look, the Risen Christ is here. Come, we have seen the Lord! He is still willing to accept all of our doubts, so that we, too, can proclaim with the community of faith, "Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!"