

“Believing Thomas”

When we last left the Apostles they were hiding in the Upper Room out of fear. These men are quite a bit different from the Apostles who followed Jesus around for three years, being obedient, being bold, going out two by two and doing the things that Jesus told them to do; He was alive and He was there for them. They are a far cry from who they would become on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit would bless and empower them beyond their wildest beliefs. The Gospel tells us that the doors of the Upper Room, the same Upper Room where the Last Supper was celebrated, were locked “*for fear of the Jews.*” The Apostles who had abandoned Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when He was arrested – were still hiding, in spite of the fact that they now knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, they did not know what to do. It would not be until the Holy Spirit was given to them that they would begin to profess their faith in spite of all odds.

Around the world today we hear of Christians who worship, just as we are doing this morning, and study the Word of God, with other believers, but they are in hiding, because it is unsafe to be a Christian in the land that they live. I can think of China, Iran and Iraq; all of the lands that ISIS, or as our President likes to say ISIL is located – for fear of being beheaded, or crucified – as a priest was on Easter Sunday! Believers are jailed, tortured and far worse – simply because they love Jesus Christ **no matter what**. It is amazing to hear about the courage and strength that the Lord has given them throughout their ordeal.

Far too often it is in our nature to harp on the negative. How many of us have incorporated into our everyday speech “*oh, I doubt it!*” Or how about: “*You’ve got to see it to believe it!*” We even go so far as to do that to one of the disciples, who is right in the middle of the action in today’s Gospel. There is evidence that he spoke up from time to time in the Gospel and asserted himself – he was no wallflower. That disciple is Didymus – the twin - better known as Thomas.

He is the same Thomas who asked Jesus in that same upper room, on the night that Jesus was arrested, in John 14:5 for direction in the way they were going. To which Jesus replied – “*I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life.*” In today’s Gospel - he was the demanding one – He demanded to see, and to touch the Risen Jesus. If you remember all the way back to Lazarus in the tomb, in John 11:16 Thomas told Jesus when they had just learned of the death of Lazarus, that he and the others would gladly go with Jesus, even if it meant death. But for some reason we tend to harp on the negative and we call this Apostle Doubting Thomas!

That name has been given to many people: To friends, relatives, and even at times to ourselves. The dictionary defines doubt as: to be undecided or skeptical about something; to tend to disbelieve; distrust; to disregard as unlikely, even to - suspect or fear.

Jesus gave us a clue when He told Thomas: “*Stop doubting, and believe*” I think we can better enhance that definition of doubt to include:

Second Sunday of Easter – April 3, 2016, Year C

- not believing,
- not trusting in or even fearing the truth,
- And not having, or lacking faith.

I would like us to take a closer look at Today's Scripture reading from the Gospel of John, and see if we can't set our focus more on believing, trusting, and having faith - instead of focusing on doubt. I believe that Thomas is severely misunderstood! I am going to go to bat for him! You see he isn't the only one who had questions about Jesus appearing to others. As we read today ---"*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 were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*" The disciples apparently didn't receive the gift that He gave them when He came in the door; He said "Shalom," or peace from Jesus' initial greeting, because they didn't rejoice until after He proved who He was. It might have been because the door was locked, and Jesus' suddenly appeared inside. They were stunned and afraid, - until Jesus showed them His wounds – which were unmistakably Jesus. When they finally recognized Him in that "locked" upper room, their joy became so great it just could not be contained. They had received the joy that Jesus had promised them in John 16:22. He told them when He was speaking of His coming death: "*I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*"

I want to suggest to you that their joy was not only because of what they saw, but it was also from what Jesus said to them. Jesus had just given these disciples their marching orders – He had just commissioned them:

- They received their call to ministry: – He said "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*"
- They received the power to forgive sins: - Jesus said "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*"

Not only had the disciples seen the Risen Jesus, received their call to ministry, and the power to forgive sins – but they themselves, received new life in the Holy Spirit –not in the abundance that they would receive on the Day of Pentecost, but Jesus gave them if you will, an appetizer and got them started in the strength of the Holy Spirit. He breathed upon them as their beloved Master. They must have been ecstatic. They must have been giddy. Can you imagine their excitement?

And you know what? Thomas missed it!

Can you imagine waiting for something, watching and hoping --- and you just missed it?

- Maybe you were attending a game or sporting event that a son, daughter or grandchild played in, and you didn't see their big hit, or big play. Someone spoke to you, distracted you, maybe phone call and you turned away at just that moment.
You just missed it!

Second Sunday of Easter – April 3, 2016, Year C

- Or you were camped out in front of the TV - waiting for some breaking news to happen – Remember what it was like in the days before TIVO, DVR's, and video tape? If you missed something on TV – there was no pause or rewind when the phone rang or you needed to go get that cold water or soda from the fridge. **You just missed it!** How blessed we are today to be able to repeat something and repeat something when we are watching TV. There is no cause for us to miss something unless we didn't record it.

I know personally, if I get home and something exciting has happened earlier in the day, and I was not there to witness it, the re-telling of the story just does not re-build the excitement of the event and the more I keep hearing about what I missed, it doesn't make it any easier. In fact it can be downright irritating – knowing that I missed it.

Can you imagine how Thomas must have felt? **Thomas just missed it!**

So Thomas comes back, through that locked door and gets hit right when he comes in with: *"We have seen the Lord!"* They go on: "He was here, and He gave us the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins ---and on and on and on..."

How many of us relate to Thomas at this point? The rush of emotions: Disappointment, sadness, concern, disbelief, or maybe even --- Doubt?

It wasn't until eight days later – the following week; Jesus came back to that same locked upper room and said *"Peace Be with you!" "Shalom!"* Thomas is there this time, and Jesus doesn't hesitate for a moment – He goes right over to him: Then he said to Thomas, *"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."* (John 20:27) Jesus goes right to Thomas' concerns, his disappointment, his sadness, his disbelief and most pointedly his doubt. Thomas' reaction is like no one else's reaction in all of Scripture – He says: *"My Lord and My God!"* I can just picture Thomas dropping to his knees, bowing before Jesus, pretty much falling on his face, and saying: *"My Lord and My God!"*

We are given right here, a very special insight by the Apostle John in this Gospel. Thomas proclaims Jesus as *"My Lord and My God!"* Here, near the end of John's Gospel, we hear him as the only disciple to actually announce Jesus as God.

- Others had declared Him the Son of God,
- Others had called him the Messiah,
- And Jesus spoke of Himself as the Son of Man.

John brings us full circle in His Gospel right from the very first words in John 1:1. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the **Word was God.**"* Logos is the Greek term used for "Word." Jesus is the Word Incarnate. The Gospel and the Bible are the written Word, but the Incarnate – the Man Himself – God Himself is the Word.

Second Sunday of Easter – April 3, 2016, Year C

The faith of Thomas steps up and clarifies beyond question the identity of Jesus – and he does it for all people that will follow. His faith proclaims Jesus Christ, the Risen Savior, as God Incarnate – God made man - the Living Word: *“My Lord and My God!”*

So let me ask you this morning: Are you still seeing Thomas as the sort of “Thomas from Missouri” – “from the Show me state?” How many of us here today still want to call him – Doubting Thomas? Jesus at this point sees him as a believer – not a doubter, saying to him: *“because you have seen me, you have believed”* I truly feel like I want to rename him **“Faithful and Believing Thomas!”** After Jesus speaks of Thomas’ belief, Jesus then speaks of other believers and their faith: *“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* Here it gets personal! Jesus is talking to you and me! *Blessed are we who believe that Jesus is the Christ!*

It has been almost 2,000 years since Jesus was born in Bethlehem, walked on this earth, suffered, died on the cross, was buried in a borrowed tomb, triumphantly rose again, and appeared to Thomas and the rest of the Disciples in the locked upper room– and yet, Jesus’ words come to us today – personally, meant for each one of us to hear and to feel - as remarkable encouragement for our faith as believers in Him.

How wonderful it would have been to be around when Jesus walked the earth – or would it have? I was reflecting on that this morning – praying over this Gospel. It was kind of painful, asking myself “what would I have done if I stood at the “way of the cross” as Jesus carried His cross. Would I have boldly jumped in to try to help like Simon of Cyrene? Or would I have hidden my face like the disciples? That’s a hard one! It would have been wonderful to have seen Jesus talk in His ministry, to have had Him touch us like He touched Thomas and the other disciples; to have personally seen Him or to have touched His robe, the hem of His garment. But we weren’t there! We can read about it, sing about it, (we sang “He is Risen” this morning) and hear about it in church - and yet Jesus calls us blessed! And we are indeed blessed: because despite not having been there – we believe in the one who died for us! We have faith in Jesus Christ, whose Resurrection we celebrated in a packed church last Sunday – Easter Sunday. We believe that we will one day share in the joy of the Resurrection when we indeed meet Jesus face to face. I don’t know about you, but I already have my words planned: *“My Lord and My God!”*

I want to share with you the words of an eyewitness who was there and his reminder to us who were not. The Apostle Peter in his first letter, chapter 1 verses 8 and 9: He says *“though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”* You see today’s Gospel message is not about doubting, but it is about believing in the Resurrected Jesus. John reminds us in his words given at the end of today’s Gospel message: *“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*