

Sermon - Low Sunday 2023
St. Thomas the Apostle
4/16/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The twentieth-century Welsh poet R.S. Thomas once wrote a poem that so perfectly describes a way that human beings sometimes understand our relationship with God. The speaker in the poem is a suitor, positioned on the ground just below the upper window of the one he loves. He has been tossing pebbles up toward the window. The beloved up in the window is God, and the pebbles, he says, are his prayers. And for some time now the poet has been tossing his prayers up toward that window, longing for God to hear them, longing for God to look down, and longing, perhaps, for God to open the window. There seems to be no response at all. And - he writes - “I would have refrained long since, but that peering once through my locked fingers, I thought I detected the movement of a curtain.” His efforts seemed hopeless, and yet there it was - the movement in the window.

This poem speaks at the heart of the Gospel story we encounter today of another Thomas: St. Thomas the Apostle, who is longing – desperately – to see Jesus. The other disciples have reported something extraordinary, but it seems that Thomas is still on the ground, aching to see that curtain move.

Some know this passage as the story of “Doubting Thomas.” Doubting Thomas? Poor Thomas is really thrown a bit under the bus here, isn’t he? We don’t remember St. Peter as “Denying Peter.” We don’t remember St. Paul as “Persecuting Paul.” Poor Thomas faithfully served his Lord and Savior for years and he gets this awful name from one small moment in his ministry when he acts, quite frankly, like most of us would have. Skepticism is no modern problem, this is something running in our blood – *we want to see for ourselves*. When we look

closely, Thomas's response to the events of this day are understandable, and not just understandable, but filled with a great compassion.

Think carefully about what is happening here. It can be easy to miss when we just encounter this passage from St. John, but this series of events in the upper room is the evening of Easter. Jesus was killed three days ago. Thomas's dear friend, rabbi, teacher, and companion - we might even say the great love of Thomas's life – the great love of the apostle's lives. All of them have left their lives behind to fall in love with this Son of God. *And then he died.* Three days ago.

It has been just hours since Mary Magdalene and the women at the tomb have reported this stunning reversal of the terrors of Good Friday. Mary Magdalene, on Easter morning, runs to the disciples and announces, "I have seen the Lord!" How strange this is! How impossible! There is no precedent or peer for this sort of Resurrection! And...she's a woman! A woman is reporting this, this is very suspicious!

Then, Jesus himself arrives in the upper room, and Thomas is not with the other disciples. When Thomas returns they tell him the very same thing: "I have seen the Lord!" Thomas gets something of a bad reputation for not believing right away, but imagine the heartbreak of this man who is still grieving. He is *grieving*. The one he followed and loved was murdered three days ago, it sure enough is going to take something radical to convince him that all will be well. Many of us know this feeling intimately ourselves. How gutting, how impossible it would be to dare to hope, only to have your hopes destroyed again. It would be like losing Jesus again. We can see how Thomas would rather hold this story of a miracle at a distance. Who could believe it.

But here is the key: just because Thomas did not believe right away, this did not mean that the Resurrection did not happen. Just because Thomas needed some more information did not take an ounce of power away from the new hope that was already illuminating the world. In

the Christian life, the truth of the Gospel is always already there, always waiting for us, always transforming the world. This is good news for us. Because when we doubt, Jesus still loves us. Jesus still comes to us, showing us his wounds and inviting us back in. There is room for each one of us, and even for all of our doubts, because that power of the Resurrection can never, ever be diminished, and when we return, we are welcomed to the table.

In this passage, it is Easter evening, and the disciples are huddled together in a room that was locked for fear of the persecutors. More likely than not, these disciples were trying to figure out how to get out of town or disappear into the crowds, because those same people who crucified Jesus could very well be after them next. Remember the events of Good Friday: when Jesus is dying on the Cross, these same disciples *flee*. Jesus comes into the room and imagine what he could've said to them: he could've said, "Hey guys! Curse you for abandoning me! How dare you leave me alone! How dare you not stand up for me! Are you cowards? Did you not believe?" This is a group that has denied him, run away from him, even betrayed him, and - when he comes into that locked room - what does Jesus say?

Peace be with you. Peace. Peace be with you. He says this twice - again a week later when Thomas has returned. *Peace be with you.* This is our Lord. Into all of the locked rooms of the world - all of the darkened, locked up hearts of the world - he enters freely and blesses them with peace. We can try to shut him out. We can try to hide in our upper rooms. We can even doubt his presence or his love, but there is nothing that can stop this peace of the Resurrection. It is always, already illuminating the world. Jesus is always, already searching for us. Even in your doubts, He will bless you. He will let you touch his wounds and weep into his shoulder. And he will bring you peace.

In the poem, R.S. Thomas tells us that he is longing for a God that seems up somewhere distant from him. We, too, can find ourselves in this world today locked in the upper room in fear just as the disciples. We keep up hope that the pebbles of our own prayers will reach him, that he will see us, and that maybe - just maybe - we will, through locked fingers, detect the small but undeniable movement of the holy curtain.

With all due respect to R.S. Thomas, the Gospel and these events in the upper room tell us a different story about Jesus. This poem might need to be changed. Because while God can feel distant from us, hidden up in a window, the reality that *Jesus is seeking after us*. Jesus enters the upper room even when it is locked. Even to people who have failed him. We try to hide ourselves in our safe little rooms, out of fear or exhaustion, and still he calls to us from the ground. He is not distant, but closer to us than our own breath and blood, longing for *us* to throw open the windows of our hearts and let inside the freshness of his peace. May we do so, this day, and always.

Amen.