

Over the past two Sundays we have discussed Jesus appearing to the two believers on the Road to Emmaus and to His disciples in the Upper Room following the Resurrection as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Each of the four Gospels records different appearances based on the author's knowledge of the events. So this morning let's look at another appearance, this time in the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John, verses nineteen through twenty-nine. I will be reading this story in two parts, starting with verses nineteen through twenty-three.

Read John 20:19-23

It seems logical that the disciples would continue to meet in the Upper Room where the Lord's Supper had been held. But as we discussed last Sunday, they met in fear behind locked doors. They were afraid of the religious authorities and listened in terror for every foot step on the stairs outside and for every knock at the door, lest they too might be arrested and crucified like Jesus.

The followers of Jesus had come to an impasse after His death; they were uncertain about what the future held despite all of Jesus' efforts to prepare them for this moment. They were excited about Mary Magdalene's news that Jesus was alive, but also a little confused; after all this seemed to be too good to be true. In fear they gathered, locked the doors and waited. Suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst and gave them the normal Eastern greeting of "Peace be with you." Now they could see with their own eyes what Mary Magdalene had claimed; Jesus was alive, He had risen! Have you ever noticed how God has a way of stepping into human history at times when it seems that all hope is gone?

It was then that Jesus gave the Church its commission, which it must never forget. He said that as God had sent Him, so He was sending them. This has been called the Charter of the Church. If Jesus Christ and His teaching and gifts of grace and salvation are to be spread throughout the world to all people it must be carried by the feet of the Church. Isaiah 52:7 states: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation."

To equip the Church for its mission, Jesus breathed on His disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit. This is the Apostle John's version of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next month. In writing this John may have been drawing similarities from the Old Testament such as the creation story in Genesis where God breathed life into Adam or where God calls on the four winds to breathe life into the valley of dead, dry bones in the Book of Ezekiel. The coming of the Holy Spirit is like the wakening of the dead. As God breathed life in humankind, so Jesus breathed life into the Church and gave it its marching orders.

Before we go on and dig into this story, let look at verse 23 which states: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Now this is a difficult verse to understand; one that we have to be very careful how we interpret. This sentence does not mean that the power to forgive sins has ever been entrusted to any one human being, denomination or church; it remains the sole responsibility of God and His Son Jesus Christ. However, it does mean that the power and responsibility to proclaim God's forgiveness is entrusted to the Church. It is then up to each individual to either accept God's forgiveness or to reject it. The role of the Church is to let the world know about God and His forgiveness.

The story is told of a dying woman who was raised as a Roman Catholic but who had for many years known Jesus Christ as her personal Savior and had stopped going to confession and doing penance. Instead, she studied her Bible and gathered with those of like faith. When she was on her deathbed some well-meaning relatives sent the parish priest to see her. He offered to hear her confession and grant her absolution. She asked the priest to show her his hands, which he did. To which she replied: "You, sir, are an impostor. The one who forgives my sins has nail prints in His hands!" The only one who can forgive our sins is God and His Son Jesus Christ.

Now as the late Paul Harvey would say, let's look at the rest of the story in John 20 as found in verses 24-29.

Read John 20:24-29

Now I hated to hear this passage read in church when I was a child. Doubting Thomas – I would slide down in the pew hoping that no one would turn around looking for the Thomases in the congregation. I felt that because I shared his name I would also be labeled as one who had little faith.

However, as I grew older, my attitude changed. I found that using the term "Doubting Thomas" helped me in my previous government career with the Federal Highway Administration. Whenever the State Highway Department or a contractor would try to sell us on a new concept, design or project, I would say that I was a Doubting Thomas and could they convince me. While this phrase would lessen the tension of a critical meeting, it also gave me the opportunity to ask more probing questions until we got the correct answer.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the disciple Thomas more. In the eleventh chapter of John, when Jesus told the disciples that He was going to Bethany after receiving the news that His friend Lazarus was near death, Thomas replied: "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." Thomas never lacked courage. There can never be any doubt that he loved Jesus. He loved

Him enough to be willing to go and die with Him while the other disciples were hesitant and afraid.

However, when Jesus was crucified, he was so broken hearted that he went off to be alone in his grief. Thomas was one of those people who had to face his suffering and his sorrow alone. So it happened that when Jesus appeared the first time to the disciples in the Upper Room, Thomas was not there. When the other disciples informed him that Jesus was alive, the news that Jesus had risen from the grave seemed too good to be true, and so he refused to believe it. He demanded proof and boldly announced that unless he could see and touch the nail holes in Jesus' hands and the wounds in His side, he would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

A week later the disciples are together again and this time Thomas is with them when Jesus appears among them once more. Jesus knew what Thomas was thinking as He knows each of our thoughts. So He repeats Thomas' previous comments word for word, and invites him to make the test he had requested. However, simply being in the presence of the Risen Lord was enough to convince Thomas that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Thomas' heart ran out in love and devotion, and in one of the greatest statements of faith in the Bible, Thomas boldly declares: "My Lord and my God!" Jesus tells him: "Thomas, you needed eyes of sight to make you believe; but the day will come when men and women will see with the eyes of faith and believe."

In his skepticism, Thomas is perhaps more like a twentieth-first century person than any of the other disciples; maybe today he would be from Missouri. His "show me" attitude is the approach that our scientific world was built on. Thus, some of us may be more comfortable with Thomas than say headstrong Peter.

But Thomas made one mistake; he withdrew from the Christian fellowship. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. And because he was not there with his fellow believers, he missed the first coming of Jesus. How much do we miss when we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try to be alone? Things can happen to us within the fellowship of the church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow comes and sadness surrounds us, we often tend to shut ourselves up and refuse to meet people. But this is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of other Christians; for it is there that we are most likely of all to meet Jesus face to face.

Only when Thomas was willing to rejoin his friends did Jesus appear to him. It was only in the fellowship of the other disciples that Jesus was finally alive to Thomas. In reality, we tend to underestimate the value of our fellowship with other Christians. Worship and fellowship are means of grace, places where the Lord becomes real to us. We look for "self-enlightenment,"

yet we fail to place ourselves where the Spirit repeatedly appears – in the company of fellow believers.

But Thomas also had two good virtues. He absolutely refused to say that he understood something when he didn't or that he believed what he did not believe. There was an uncompromising honesty about him. He was not ashamed to say that he didn't understand something or that he had some doubts. He was not afraid to ask questions. He was not the kind of person who would rattle off the Apostles' Creed without first understanding what it all meant. Thomas had to be sure. There is more faith in a person who insists on being sure than in the person who simply repeats things which they have never really thought out, and which they may not really believe. It is doubt like Thomas' which in the end arrives at certainty. Think of doubt as an invitation to think.

Thomas' second virtue was that when he was sure, he went the whole way; he never went halfway; he was all in. He doubted in order to become sure. When a person fights their way through their doubts to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, they acquire a certainty that no one who just accepts things without thinking can ever achieve.

You have to love and admire Thomas. He was a man who had to be sure; he was a man who had to count the cost. But once he was sure, and once he had counted the cost, he was the man who went to the ultimate limit of faith and obedience. All his life Thomas had learned to ask the right questions. A faith like Thomas' is better than any half-hearted profession of faith, and obedience like his is better than a passive consent which agrees to do something without counting the cost and then goes back upon its word. Thomas' faith statement "My Lord and my God" is a model for us all.

In 1887, Henry Drummond preached a sermon entitled "Dealing with Doubt." Here is one of his observations: "Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is can't believe; unbelief is won't believe. Doubt is honest; unbelief is a stubborn attitude. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness. Loving darkness rather than light – that is what Jesus attacked. But for the intellectual questioning of Thomas, Philip, and Nicodemus, and many others who came to Jesus to have their great problems solved, Jesus was respectful and generous and tolerant." This story is not about Thomas' doubt or skepticism, but about the abundant grace of Jesus who meets Thomas' demands point by point in order to move him to faith.

Someone once asked Mother Teresa what was the first thing she was going to ask Jesus when she got to heaven. She replied: "I'm going to tell Him that He has a whole lot of explaining to do." As you study the gospels, you see that Jesus was always willing to answer questions; He welcomed inquiring minds. Jesus comes to Thomas where he is with his doubts and makes a

believer out of him. The story of Thomas provides encouragement for us all to be honest with God and ourselves. We all come to the Lord by different paths – some by their hearts and others by their minds. But no matter how we got here, and no matter how many years we have walked with Jesus or the number of times we have read the Bible, there will still be periods of doubt or times when we will question why certain things happen. That's human nature.

Unbelief is the decision to live your life as if there is no God. It is a deliberate decision to reject Jesus Christ and all He stands for. But doubt is something different. Doubt arises within the context of faith. It is a longing to be sure of the things in which we trust. But it is not and need not be a problem. Believe me, doubts and questions are normal in an honest personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and are necessary if we are to grow spiritually.

Thomas thought that he needed to touch Jesus' wounds in order to believe. As you think about this story, ask yourself: "What do I need to do in order to believe like Thomas? What questions do I have? What's keeping me from a deeper personal relationship with Jesus? What barriers have I erected between Jesus and myself?"

The point is – don't be afraid to ask questions. There are no dumb questions when it comes to our personal relationship with the Lord. This is how we grow to be the person He wants us to be. As the Lord Jesus Christ was more than willing to answer Thomas' question and help him grow closer to God, so is He ready to help each of us. It is Jesus' desire to hear each one of us say with Thomas: "My Lord and my God." Amen