

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Second Sunday of Easter- April 16 2023

Scripture reading: John 20:19-29

IN PRAISE OF THOMAS

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” That’s what Thomas said, and because of those words he’s long been called “doubting Thomas”. It has not been meant as a compliment.

Instead, he’s usually been seen as the only one of the disciples impertinent enough to insist that Jesus appear directly to him before he would believe. Traditionally, it’s also been felt that when Jesus did appear to him, he properly put Thomas in his place by saying, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

But I have to admit that I like Thomas. Or at least I can identify with him. I think the negative “doubting Thomas” label that’s been hung on him is a bad rap. He wasn’t asking for anything more than what the rest of the disciples had already received. They had “seen the Lord” and believed. He, too, wanted to see the Lord- and then he would believe.

Every time I hear today’s Scripture story about him, I figure that I probably would have felt a lot like he did. At the very least, I’m grateful that he stood up for his doubt. In doing so, he helps me muster the courage to face my own.

What about my doubt? We’re in Easter time with its proclamation of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. He is the first fruits of God’s new creation, the sure sign that sin and death finally will be completely overcome. The Risen Christ is the guarantee that in the End God will be all in all and at Easter time we especially celebrate this greatest of hopes. Last Sunday from this pulpit it was my joy to enthusiastically preach this core conviction of our faith.

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What about my doubt? And what about any resurrection doubt that you might have? We are in Easter time with its proclamation of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. He is the first fruits of

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But doubt about it is there in the very first Easter stories. Last week our reading from St. Matthew's Easter story ended with the angel at Jesus' empty tomb directing Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who was with her to tell Jesus' disciples to go to Galilee because Jesus will meet them there. The disciples do as the angel has instructed, and yes- the risen Christ meets them in Galilee. Yet Matthew 28, verse 17 then says, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted."

Similarly, in St. Luke's story of the first Easter, Mary Magdalene and several other women go to Jesus' tomb. They find it empty when suddenly two men in dazzling clothes appear and announce to them that Jesus has risen. They return to Jesus' disciples to tell them this great, good news, but when they hear it Luke says, "(T)hese words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (24:11).

In today's story from John's gospel, we then hear once more of the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples, this time behind locked doors. He bids them peace, commissions them to carry on his work, and gives them the Holy Spirit. But Thomas isn't there when this first happens and he says straight out, "I have my doubts. I'll have to see him with my own eyes."

To bring this closer to us- it seems that our situation is even more difficult than that of the first Easter doubters. They at least had the possibility, shortly after Jesus' death, of the risen Christ appearing directly to them. For us, that time is long past.

So, what about our doubt? What do we do with it?

First, we need to be passionate about it. We need to let our doubt *burn* with the fire for truth- Truth with a capital T, the Truth that really matters. Our doubt has to home in on the essentials, on the *really* big questions.

For instance, what *is* the ultimate meaning and purpose of our lives? Easter proclaims, "Love is stronger than death. God, who is Love, is at the heart of everything. God's power for good finally will triumph over every evil." Is any of that true? If so, what difference does it make? What difference does it make to *my* life *now*? *Those* are the kinds of questions our doubt needs to focus on.

If instead it degenerates into a fluttering over trivialities or into a preoccupation with what is merely interesting or entertaining, then it's *the wrong kind of doubt*- a doubt that's unworthy of the name. Then it's merely of the brain and not of the heart and it likely helps us to distract from and evade the Truth rather than open up to and embrace it. Our doubt must home in passionately on what truly matters.

Secondly, our doubt must be *honest*. It needs to be rooted in passion that *sincerely* searches for better, deeper, and truer understanding. Even more, it must commit us to *changing ourselves and our lives* when the truth that we discover demands it.

I know that I've failed in this respect in my own life. I clearly recall times when I and my circle of friends had a pat response to any challenging idea that came our way. It went something like this: "I doubt it, man. There's no way. Says who? That's stupid. I doubt it."

That was *not* honest doubt. It was a way of being afraid and superficially rebellious. It was a way of saying, "That's threatening to me. I don't like it. I don't know about it, and I'm at least going to pretend that I don't care about it."

But Thomas's doubt was different. His was the passionate kind that comes from a genuinely searching heart. When he heard his fellow disciples announce, "We have seen the Lord," he understood that this claim put his very life at stake. He knew that if it really was true that the Crucified One had been raised from the dead, then everything was changed, and *he* would have to change. His response was not the fascinated detachment of some intellectual dandy. He didn't say, "Hmmm- Jesus raised from the dead, you say? How interesting. Let's have him over for brunch to chat about it for a bit."

No, when Thomas hears the claim that Jesus has been raised from the dead, he steels himself to say, "OK, you have seen him and believe. I, too, must see him before I can believe- with my whole heart." Then when Jesus does appear to him, Thomas isn't flip, cool, or dismissive. He doesn't say, "Hey, Jesus- you're back from the dead? Wow. Amazing. But get outta here now because You bother me." Instead, Thomas falls to his knees and the words pour from him, "My Lord and my God." Thomas commits his life to the Truth of the life that he sees before him.

Thomas had the right kind of doubt, but . . . can we learn from him how to overcome our own? The risen Christ finally appeared to him, but he doesn't to us. We hear, "Christ is risen, God's love reigns supreme", and yet our doubt can understandably linger. We want to believe, but . . .

To put it simply- so much bad happens and so much good does not. Nature turns furious in earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis, pandemics. Millions upon millions have their lives cut short. Whole peoples get ground down in war, injustice, and oppression. Love, once in full bloom, dies and families created from it, fall apart in bitterness and even hatred. Communities deteriorate and violence rages in their streets. The list of bad is so easy to multiply. In the face of it, how can we truly believe Easter's proclamation that God's love ultimately triumphs? Doubt about that does not readily go away. What *do* we do with it?

Let's look again at Thomas. What did he really want to know before he could believe? He said, "Unless I put my fingers in his *wounds* . . ." Thomas most needed to know that it was the *crucified* Jesus who had been raised- the One who had been scourged, crowned with thorns, mocked, spit on, and finally nailed to a cross. When he sees that it is *this* One who has risen from the dead, it's then that his confession flows, "My Lord and my God!" He sees that the *Crucified* Christ is God in our flesh and *that* makes the difference.

What difference does it make? Exactly this- it shows us that the suffering which weighs so heavily on us is *the* place where God is *most* present. We instinctively feel, "There's so much hurt, brokenness, and injustice in this world. *Where* is the God who supposedly loves us so much?" In response, Thomas says, "You think that our suffering is the sign of God's absence, but it's actually *the* place where God is *most* present.'

That *is* one of the deepest meanings of the cross of Jesus Christ. On Calvary we see that the love of the God who really is God is *suffering* love. The love of the true God is literally *compassion*- love that suffers with. To say that the Crucified Christ is God is to say that God is with us in the depths of our suffering and never abandons us to it. God is with us always, even and especially in the midst of the worst.

But is that enough? I don't think so.

After all, the Crucified Christ as God does not answer *why* there's so much hurt and unfairness. God on the cross doesn't explain the *purpose* of so much pain and misery. The suffering God offers us a sustaining presence in the midst of all our trials and heartache, but, frankly, from *God* we long for much more.

We want a love that not only suffers with us but that also has the power to triumph *once and for all* over every plague of sin and death. We're in Easter time. The One who was crucified has also been *raised*. The Risen Christ brings the promise that God's suffering love will *ultimately win*. It's the promise that the new heaven and earth finally will come, that the new creation will arrive in which death and sorrow, crying and pain will be *no more*.

It was crucial for Thomas to know that the One who had been raised was indeed the One who had been crucified. But at the heart of Easter is the claim that the one who was crucified is indeed *the One who has been raised*. That is where the promise of God's *ultimate* victory is held out to us and *that* is what our hearts *yearn* for the most.

Thomas finally received his direct and convincing appearance of the Risen Lord, but we don't. If we are to believe, we have to be among those blessed ones that Jesus said will not see but still will come to believe. In the darkness of so much suffering and evil can we really trust that God's love is indeed almighty so that it will finally and fully triumph? What do we do with our doubt?

Undeniably, we still live in the middle of Easter Saturday. Time and again we see innocent ones who, like Jesus, have been unjustly killed and their bodies laid in the grave. But the crucified ones are not *all* that we see. The world is full of Calvary, yes- but we get glimpses of Easter, too.

The natural world can and does crush us, but we also find great beauty in it and take joy in the wonder of its annual renewal. Whole peoples are ground down in oppression, injustice, and war, but there are fits, starts, and even breakthroughs towards liberation and peace. Love in our families does wither and die, but we also know the joys of forgiveness, reconciliation and new beginnings. Our communities do break down to the point where even our young ones wantonly kill each other. But we also see other young people travel long distances on spring breaks and summer vacations to help out people that they've never even met.

What do we make of those glimpses? Are the little Easters enough to overcome our doubt about the big Easter promise? In the silence of our hearts, we must each decide.

In that silence, we need to search out our heart's deepest desire. We need to go to the still point at the very center of our souls where the very best in us cries out most fervently for the ultimate triumph of God's love. When we do, I dare say that we will find God *beyond* our doubt.

There we will discover that our deepest longing is itself the work of God's Spirit within us and that *the* Spirit is there even when we are not- sighing, groaning, and crying on our behalf in the name of that same longing. Even more, we'll find that *the* Spirit bears witness to our spirit that the Easter promise *is* real, that our longing for God's new heaven and earth is in fact destined to be fulfilled even though we can scarcely imagine what that will mean.

In our soul's silent center, we will learn that the cry we share with the Spirit is not rooted in a pathetic and wishful thinking as we may well fear. Instead, we'll see that these cries are among the early pangs of birth, the labor pains, so to speak, of the new creation on which God's love is tirelessly at work. In that silence, the Holy Spirit assures us that the little Easters that we know

are indeed the best clues to what is really going on at the heart of everything, no matter how much they are overshadowed by all the Calvarys that we still know. In that way, courage for the risk into a full Easter faith can come. Dare we believe?

By God's grace, we do. We do, and yet this doesn't mean that our honest doubt ever disappears. Until the End, it remains a great gift that keeps us mindful of the awe-full mystery of the God in whom we trust. It keeps before us those famous words from St. Paul in I Corinthians 13 where he says that now we see only "as through a glass, dimly", but one day we will see "face to face".

In the meantime, even in the darkest nights of our doubt, we can be assured by this word of the Lord that has come to us through that great and searching Christian soul, the genius mathematician and mystic, Blaise Pascal. He wrote, "(Thus says the Lord), 'Console Thyself in this: Thou wouldst not seek Me, if Thou hadst not found Me.'" Amen.