

**April 12, 2015 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter)**

**TEXT: John 20:19–29**

**TITLE: D.T. & M.M.—Part 1**

During the month of March, we had two billboards advertising our church—one on Bigelow Boulevard, one on Freeport Road. A quick show of hands: How many of you saw one of those billboards? The five word slogan said: “Got questions? So do we.” The billboards were meant to be an invitation to join us here at ELPC, where we ask questions, worship, pray and learn about God together. Now, it may seem counter-intuitive to admit that people of faith have questions and doubts. Don’t most preachers emphasize confident, unquestioning faith? Think of Joel Osteen’s book Your Best Life Now or Robert Schuller’s Be Happy Attitudes. And if their advice is too exuberant for you, there are always more measured advice-givers like Garrison Keillor, who has said: “Be cheerful. It could be worse. Someday it will be. Be glad that it isn’t yet.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet if you look carefully at the Easter events from long ago, the people entrusted with the good news of Christ’s resurrection were not confident, exuberant figures. The two most prominent Easter characters are Mary Magdalene and Doubting Thomas—one who wept in disbelief outside Jesus’ empty tomb and the other who argued in unbelief when told the risen Christ had appeared to the disciples. Both of them were strong disciples of Jesus and yet grappled with serious questions of faith. Truthfully we can learn from them, because there is a bit of both of them in every one of us. And that’s a good thing. Really.

Let’s start with Doubting Thomas. In his defense, let’s be clear that he was not the only one who had questions and doubts after Jesus’ empty tomb was revealed on Easter morning. I read earlier from John 20 beginning with verse 19, but verse 18 says this: *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he has said these things to her.* The entire group of disciples had heard Mary’s testimony about Jesus being raised from the dead, yet they all obviously still struggled with disbelief and doubt, because instead of running out in the streets to proclaim the good news, they huddled together in an upper room behind locked doors. On some level, Thomas simply gave voice to the doubts that all the disciples were struggling with after Easter morning.

Also, as any student of church history can tell you, Doubting Thomases have been part of Christianity from Day One. Whenever people of faith have gathered together, Thomas has been there through the ages raising his hand from the back of room with a probing question or comment. In the first century AD, Thomas and others asked, “How is it possible for an eternal God in Christ to die on the cross?” which led to a belief in Jesus being fully human, fully divine. In the second century AD, Thomas and others asked, “Was Jesus equal with God or a creation of God?”, which led to the language of the Trinity—Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, Three in One. In the early Middle Ages, some asked whether

Christian faith is a rational belief system, which led Anselm and Aquinas to compose their methodical proofs of God's existence. In the late Middle Ages, mystics compared doubt to a "dark night of the soul" and saw it as a necessary time of spiritual hunger that leads us to deeper faith. In the end, Socrates was right: The unexamined life is not worth living—and in the same way, an unexamined, unquestioned faith is not worth believing. Doubting Thomas and the Easter story go together, because wherever we are professing faith in a living, resurrected Christ, Thomas is close at hand—asking the hard questions that must be considered if we are going to walk by faith in the world today.

Think of it this way: To doubt means you care enough not to be satisfied with simplistic or shallow answers. The Jewish-Christian faith has always valued dialogue and debate. Jesus did that in the temple when he was 12 years old; later Nicodemus asked him questions, and Jesus questioned his disciples, asking them "Who do people say that I am?" To be honest, I have lots of questions about the Christian faith. That is part of why I am grateful to have been called to ministry, because I am forced to grapple with doubt and uncertainty every week through bible study and preparing these sermons. God's grace is made perfect in our weakness, so I can say that Doubting Thomas and I have been buddies for years!

When do faith questions arise? They don't pop up when things are going great. Rather they emerge when there's a disconnect between the world we see and the world we hope God is in charge of. If we close one eye to look at the world, then close the other eye to consider God, we typically struggle to bring those two perspectives into focus with our eyes wide open. God made the world, but the world is not the same as God—and were it not for God's mercy actively countering human sin, this world would be in much worse shape. Let me offer an example. The next few weeks will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of three events that unleashed fresh evil over the face of the earth. Human beings have always been prone to war. But during World War I, on April 22, 1915, contravening existing international law, Germany unleashed a yellow-green cloud of poisonous gas over the battlefields in France – and chemical warfare began on earth. Then on May 7, German submarines sank the Lusitania, killing 1,200 civilians; followed by May 31<sup>st</sup>, when an airship randomly dropped explosive and incendiary bombs on London, permanently blurring the line between soldier and civilian casualties during times of war.<sup>2</sup> Once this Pandora's box of inhumane warfare tactics was opened, things only became worse in later wars. Now armies felt free to use chemical and biological warfare, firebomb Dresden, drop nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, scatter napalm in Vietnam, enlist suicide bombers to target civilians and tourists, and organize modern drone warfare, cyberattacks and wage permanent wars on terrorism.

Groups of men meeting behind locked doors, captive to a gospel of militarism and fear, will always come up with new ways to inflict unholy violence here on earth. That's why someone needs to be brave enough to be Thomas—asking the

uncomfortable questions, calling for proof, speaking up so that Easter truths remain a part of today's global conversation. It is not easy being the lone dissenting voice in the crowd. It's not easy to express doubts and raise questions. But that is most often how the voice of faith is heard, as it challenges the dominant narratives of a fearful, sinful, and violent world.

When Thomas heard that the risen Christ had appeared, he was upfront about his doubts. So when Jesus appeared to Thomas one week later, he said to him directly (vs. 27) "Do not doubt but believe." Believe—the Greek word here is "pistos"—it appears almost 100 times in John's gospel. Now, Jesus knows that Thomas won't be able to logically, rationally, wrap his head around the idea of resurrection. He is not giving him a homework assignment or making intellectual demands of Thomas. To believe—"pistos"—means something deeper. It means to be persuaded of something, to place confidence in something, to trust. It's less a "head" thing and more a "heart" thing. Likewise, to whatever degree doubting Thomas abides in us, the faith answers we seek will not come from more study and rational thought. The answers will come from placing our confidence and trust in the One who is beyond all human knowledge and logic. In effect Jesus says to all us Doubting Thomases, "Don't be untrusting, but trust."

Serene Jones is the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City—a brilliant scholar and theologian—and she points out two reasons why the story of Doubting Thomas is so powerful for us today. First, the risen Christ did not open up the door and casually stroll into the room to join the disciples in their post-Easter deliberations. He was never simply another voice in this world's arguments about truth and justice. No, Jesus passed right through a closed, locked door—showing it to be a feeble earthly barricade as all human barriers are in relation to a living, all-powerful God. Second, he passed through that flimsy barrier solely for the purpose of getting to where fearful disciples were gathered. And if once was not enough, he would do it a second time, especially to reach dear ol' skeptical Thomas, whom no one else seemed able to convince.<sup>3</sup> Nothing will stop Christ from coming to us in our time of need.

Jesus, the risen Christ, offered peace back then and he offers peace now. Jesus, the risen Christ, extends his wounded hands and calls us to look closely at wherever scars are present in this world. For wherever brutal violence is honestly acknowledged, it is in those places that Christ is most truly and powerfully present. He is present in a way that dispels doubts. He is present in a way that changes everything. He is present in a way that pushes us to say, "My Lord and my God" no matter who else may overhear us or be surprised by our profession of faith. Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, is the one who comes through our locked doors, who knows our wounds and openly shares his own, and in him do we place our "pistos," our confidence, trust, faith, hope and belief.

So today consider these three questions: 1) Behind what closed door in your life is Christ anxious to appear? 2) How will you be the voice of Thomas so that

others may be healed, renewed and redeemed this day? 3) How will you trust Christ Jesus more fully today?

AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keillor, The Keillor Reader, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Rose, book review of A Higher Form of Killing by Diana Preston, New York Times Book Review, April 5, 2015, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Serene Jones, *Theological Perspective – John 20:19-31*, Feasting on the Word, Second Sunday of Easter, p. 402.