

## CLOSED DOORS/OPEN DOUBTS

Central Presbyterian Church

April 8, 2018

Scripture: John 20:19-31

We Christians today continue to rejoice in the Easter story of the resurrection of Jesus. Yet we may take the resurrection more or less for granted. While Easter comes around every year, we continue to celebrate. Then we come back the next Sunday, even without all the hosannas and hoop-la of the previous week. The Sunday after Easter is often called “Low Sunday,” I am grateful for your faithful presence today.

We may take it for granted that those first disciples were just as ready to rejoice as we were last Sunday. But the gospels tell us something quite different. The followers of Jesus were grieving the loss of their best friend. They felt abandoned by their leader. And they were very frightened.

Today's reading from John's gospel tells us that the core group of disciples had locked themselves into a house. This occurred the evening of the same day that some of them had discovered the empty tomb. They feared that the religious authorities who crucified Jesus would come after them because they were so close to Jesus. Gathered together, they indulged in more than a pity-party. They were confused. They had no idea what they were going to do now. Their beloved leader was no longer with them. How on earth were they going to even make it through the night, let alone live day-to-day from now on? Was the news of the empty tomb simply a rumor? Was it all too good to be true?

Then suddenly, Jesus appeared and stood among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. And he showed them his wounds to prove that he was indeed their beloved Jesus. With his blessing, Jesus commissioned these disciples to go on; to continue to share the love, the forgiveness, the peace – all those gifts with which he had blessed them.

But Thomas wasn't with the disciples in that locked room. Even though Jesus had appeared to the rest of them, they must have been still wondering what had just happened. I can't imagine that they suddenly experienced a magic transformation from fear to ecstatic joy. Yes, Jesus had appeared to them, but they must still have been very confused.

Where was Thomas? Was he hiding elsewhere for the same reason the other disciples had locked themselves in that house? Or was he the only one who was brave enough to go out and get some food for the hungry group? Back then, there was no Bite Squad to deliver a food order, even if they could call one in.

Later, when Thomas did return to the group, they shared their experience with him. Can you imagine their loud jumble of excited voices? They must have all been talking and shouting at once as they shared their surprising experience. We have seen the Lord!

“Really?” wondered Thomas. Did they really see Jesus? Or had they simply worked themselves up into a panicked frenzy and confused emotional state? Had they really only imagined that Jesus appeared to them? Was this just fake news? Or did it really happen? Thomas was not going to believe their report unless he personally experienced Jesus' presence.

*“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.”*

John 20:25

As the next week went by, these disciples must have continued to try to make sense of what had happened. All of their faith leaders in the past had died. None of them had come back to life. Did they really have a new mission? With fear and worry, they must have been

slinking around in the shadows. They were likely all making sure they were not recognized as those devoted followers of the one whom the authorities had crucified. I can only imagine the panic and tension everyone must have felt.

Today's gospel story tells us that, after a week, the disciples were back in the house. The doors were closed. This time Thomas was with them. Again, Jesus came and stood among them, saying "Peace be with you." Then he invited Thomas to reach out and touch his wounds. Thomas's doubts were answered! "My Lord and my God!" he exclaimed.

With this clear expression of faith, Thomas and the rest of the disciples began to understand that their mission had not ended. It had really just begun.

We give Thomas a bum rap when we label him "Doubting Thomas." Abbie's and Eva's beautiful gift in song this morning portrays a Thomas who doubts himself. He is a person who says,

*I can't keep my promises  
Cause I don't know what's safe....  
Can I be used to help others find truth  
When I'm scared that I'll find proof that it's a lie*

Chris Theile

Self-doubt is real for many people. It's hard to go forward in life if nothing seems safe. Perhaps disciple Thomas felt some of that self-doubt as well.

I see another aspect of the Doubting Thomas of John's gospel. I'd like to suggest a different descriptive label for him. I invite you to explore the ideas of Inquiring Thomas; Or Searching Thomas.

The disciples' whole world had been turned upside down. What they had expected to be a certain future was now up for grabs. Why wouldn't Thomas want some form of clear, hands-on proof? He was an honest person who was willing to confront his doubts and seek clear answers.

How can we best live out our faith in today's troubled world? Are we not often much like Thomas? How many times have we said something like, "I'll believe it when I see it."? This is who we humans are – skeptics, folk who ask questions. It's part of our human nature, our spirituality. Laurens Van der Post, a 20th-century Afrikaner author, educator, and philosopher, once said, "Human beings are never more frightening than when they are convinced beyond doubt that they are right."

Today it is quite clear that groups are often united by a their joint understanding that they are doing a worthwhile and important thing. That important goal may – or may not – be the best thing for all concerned. It is so easy to get on the bandwagon by simply taking a leader's word that this is the best and right and only thing to believe in and/or to do. But is it really the best idea? The best action? Or should we look deeper before wholeheartedly jumping in?

Too often today we hear the term, "Fake News." Among all the versions of any particular story, what is the truth? What is the full story? Are we willing to follow Thomas's lead and look into all the options? Ask questions? Check it all out on those fact-checking web sites before passing the story on through social media? Are we willing to enter into conversations with those with whom we disagree? Will we listen respectfully to the opinions of another without judging his or her views?

I have discovered some guidelines in this area that come from the Celtic roots of our faith:

*Before you assume, learn the facts.  
Before you judge, understand why.  
Before you hurt someone, feel.*

*Before you speak, think.*

In another vein: Today we are quite aware that members of the millennial generation, as well as many others, are less likely to attend church. We often see indications of diminished numbers of committed Christians. Millennials are often not interested in our familiar traditional Christian rituals and stories. They want a fresh approach. So do others.

This past week I spoke with my son – a Gen-Xer, not a millennial - and mentioned that the focus of this sermon was Thomas. He quickly responded, “Thomas was my favorite disciple when I was growing up.” Perhaps he saw early on that it was perfectly OK to doubt. It was – and is – wise to ask questions. I think we all want to experience a faith that touches our lifestyles and our beliefs in freedom and justice.

Thomas is indeed the patron saint of all who have a healthy sense of doubt and questioning. Thomas models for us a healthy way to continue to recognize our doubts and search for answers that will deepen our faith.

Today's generations, more than ever, want a faith that they can touch and be touched by. Last Sunday – Easter Sunday – we were invited to join together in the prayer of confession:

*God, you call us to new journeys and to paths unknown,  
but too often we remain stuck in place,  
unwilling to let go of that which is known to us and has become comfortable.  
We resist your tugs at our heart and our conscience.....*

What might it take for us to leave our own comfort zones, to ask questions, and to listen intently to the questions of others? How might we even join Thomas in asking a few questions of ourselves and of our own faith. Is faith just a comfortable blanket we wrap around ourselves? Or might we be open to recognizing and exploring our own doubts?

Whether in our daily living “out in the world,” or within our life of faith, Thomas can be our patron saint of questions and doubt. Honoring our doubts and our questions is how we grow in our faith. It's how we connect with God and live out God's truth in our daily lives.

When we feel overwhelmed by our doubts, we can let the faith of the community that surrounds us carry us until we get back on track. Theologian Frederick Buckner says this about doubt:

*Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God,  
if you don't have any doubts your are either kidding yourself or are asleep.  
Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*

*Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC, p. 20*

I invite all of us this morning to join in the vow in the last lines of Chris Theile song that Abbie and Eva sang this morning:

*I'm a doubting Thomas  
I'll take your promise  
Though I know nothing's safe  
O' me of little faith*

Chris Theile

Children sometimes sit with their pain, their anger, locking themselves in their bedrooms. It's hard to unlock the door, yet the very thing these children often crave is to crawl onto the lap and into the arms of a loving parent who knows them so well.