

**“The Gift of Doubting (with) Thomas”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – April 16, 2023**

**Please Read:
I Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31**

Our first lesson today is from I Peter, traditionally sent by the apostle Peter through his colleague Silvanus to the churches in Asia minor, just before his execution in Rome around the year 64. Even if you haven't visited Rome, you have likely seen St. Peter's square. On the square is an obelisk that legend has it was the last thing Peter saw before his execution in the Roman circus. It has a cross on top in honor of him.

Peter knew, like many of us here today, that life can change rapidly from one moment to the next. Today, for example, is known as “Low Sunday,” as of course last Sunday this room was packed with people and today, well, not so much. There are various quick changes in life. We can go rather quickly from health to illness, from riches to poverty, from trust to betrayal, and from security and order to violence and chaos.

Peter knew this well. He was the one who had proclaimed his faith boldly, only to deny Jesus three times. He was the one who saw Jesus go from the triumphal entry with loud *hosannas*, to face the same crowds shouting *crucify, crucify!* Peter was the one who raced to the tomb that early Easter morning, only to find it empty...

Amidst all of the ambiguities, perplexities and uncertainties of life, doubt is perhaps a natural state of mind. All of the disciples had their doubts, but it was Thomas who openly expressed them. I like the fact that Thomas is not shy about voicing his questions and concerns. He speaks for many who have not seen, and who will not believe until God offers self-revelation in some tangible way. Doubters are some of my favorite people, because once transformed by the Living God, there is no stopping them. Thomas went farther than any of the other disciples, founding the *Mar Thoma* Church of India, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world.

Peter describes what changed those first disciples as *a living hope*, a hope which carried them through difficult and painful times and even sustained him as he faced death. You'll remember he requested to be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord...

The good news, according to Peter, and still for us today, is that God “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...”

Indeed, Peter was transformed from a cowardly betrayer to a catalyzing purveyor of the faith, from a coarse follower to an eloquent leader, from a self-protecting taker to a self-sacrificing giver. All because of the new birth he experienced that convinced him death was not the final word. There was not just an abstract *something*, but a loving *someone* beyond the grave, and an eternal kingdom worth pursuing in the present, a future reality worth living into here and now defined by love.

Peter affirms, “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable joy, for we are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls.” Notice that salvation is a present-future reality. It is a deep transformation from the inside out, a paradigm shift that takes place at the depths of our being but which affects every area of our lives. The Greek word here for soul is *psuche*, from which we get our words psychology and psychiatry.

Dr. Gerber’s presence with us here today is such a gift, and I am looking forward to his talk. He has studied at some of the finest schools in the world and has given his life to the healing work of psychology. We forget that part of the work to which we are all called is the care of souls. Healing through loving and caring relationships, through listening and paying attention to peoples’ life stories is part of the life of faith.

Faith produces new freedom; a *living hope* that gives us strength to push through paralyzing fears and doubts. It’s a paradox, but the good news transforms us so that we are not too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. Rather, we are so securely heavenly good that we can be more seriously earthly-minded. We can *soulfully* give our lives to make a difference in this world, to work for a better life and fairer world for all.

Thomas was transformed from adamant agnostic to convinced curator of the faith... What changed? There are a number of factors. The first is perhaps his strong doubt that led him to demand some answers. He wasn’t a push-over. He was curious. He asked questions. It was Thomas who asked, “How can we know the way?” If you get a chance, google Caravaggio’s painting depicting the scene of Thomas putting his finger in Jesus’ side... It was Paul Tillich who affirmed *doubt is not the opposite of faith, but rather an essential part of faith...*

But secondly, there is an important connection between Jesus showing the disciples his wounds and their belief that he is the Risen Christ. Just after Thomas touches his wounds, he cries out, “My Lord and my God.” In other words, Christian faith does not deny the reality of pain and suffering in our world, the death, the destruction our violence causes. There are very real scars. There are real wounds. Only a God who can identify with real suffering can offer redemption.

It seems to me that wounded-ness is part of what it means to be human. Unless we embrace our own experience of weakness and wounded-ness, we have no way to identify with those who are hurting and crying out for healing. As Henri Nouwen titled one of his books, maybe the only true healers are “wounded healers.”

Christ came to those fickle and fearful disciples, showed them his scars, and spoke a word of shalom to them, a word of healing and wholeness. And he told them he would be sending them forth. In this passage we see an outline of the church’s whole life: Peace be with you comes straight out of the worship liturgy. Being shown Jesus’ hands and side alludes to the Lord’s Supper, and the breathing of the Holy Spirit comes from the early church’s practice of baptism. Being sent out is, of course, our mission as God’s people, and forgiving sins is the texture of the church’s inner life. As Phil Yancey put it, the world can do just about everything better than the church, except one thing: grace. If we are called to do anything, it is to be dispensers of grace for the world.

I love that Karl Barth once remarked. To say the old line from the creed, “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church” does *not* mean that we believe in the church at all. Rather, it means that we believe God is alive and at work in the church. We do not believe in the church, but we believe that the church comes alive as the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Risen Christ, fills and takes charge of the lives of us who are the church.

Let’s remember, as Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Easter means we can never nail Christ down, not even if the nails we use are real and the thing we nail him to is a cross.” Killing Jesus, says Walter Wink, is like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing it away.

32 years ago on Easter at the Union Church in Mexico City, I baptized my wife Kim. I asked her if I could tell this story, and she said I could, because it's the church's story. It's an Easter story. She had not grown up in the church, as her father had had a bad experience once, and felt like we’re just a bunch of hypocrites. Fair! She had even gone to visit a church with her father, but not one person spoke to them and so she got the message this wasn’t for her... When I met her, she had a good job with the foreign service, money, nice house to live in, a maid, the prestige of a diplomatic passport and privileges, etc. But she wondered, "Is this all there is?"

While she was on home-leave, a friend shared the gospel with her and gave her a Bible to read. She doubted, but prayed, “*God if you are there, show me...*” She started reading the gospel according to John, and when she came to the verse where Jesus said, "Blessed are

those who have not seen and yet have come to believe..." *she knew*. The Spirit confirmed the truth in her heart. And she confessed Jesus as Lord and was baptized.

You know it wasn't my preaching that spoke to her heart. To be honest, it was probably despite me. Despite our hypocrisy and constant attempts to keep nailing him down, living according to our worst fears and doubts, Christ continues to enter our lives, to invite us to touch his wounds and receive his Spirit, and Christ sends us out to be wounded healers, vulnerable but loving dispensers of God's grace...

Friends, you may not see the Risen Lord face to face like Thomas. You may at times wonder if we in the church have anything left to go on... You may have scars that run so deep you feel that there is no hope. But there is hope... There is one reason to believe... And He is here even now. We can't keep him out, hold him down, or nail him up... Right now, the Crucified Risen Christ breaks in and offers himself to you. With his pierced hands and side he invites you to receive his spirit of grace and peace.

It may sound strange, but maybe not seeing a very glorious church on this very low Sunday is a start to seeing and believing. And believing, you will have a new life of freedom, grace, hope and self-giving love.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.