**Doubting Faith and Faithful Doubt**

**Text: John 20:27-28**

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We really need to give “Doubting Thomas” a break. By the end of the story, Thomas believes. It’s really the story of “*Believing* Thomas.” Let me explain:

It’s been more than a week since Jesus was killed. The Lord has appeared on two occasions to his followers. But Thomas was not with them. And he’s very skeptical that his friends have somehow “seen the Lord.” Thomas wants to see some evidence before he’ll believe. But not just any evidence. He wants to see Jesus’ wounds. Only then will he believe that the Crucified One is also the Risen One. So it is that the following Sunday, Jesus appears to the disciples, including Thomas. They’re in hiding, out of fear that they too will be arrested. The Risen Lord, who knows the heart of each of his followers, doesn’t have to wait for Thomas to say anything. He shows his wounds to the resident skeptic, and Thomas says, “My Lord and my God!”

Please note two things about Believing Thomas. First, Thomas moves very quickly to a deeper faith than the other disciples. It’s a week after they first see the Lord, and they’re still hiding. Somehow they didn’t get the message that Jesus’ Resurrection means they no longer need to fear arrest, or opposition, or death itself. But Thomas sees Jesus and immediately he knows that the Risen One is also the *Holy* One: the Divine Word made flesh. The incarnation of the Divine Word in Jesus is the key point of John’s gospel, and Thomas is the first one who gets it. “My Lord and my *God*,” he says. The God who has come to us in Christ Jesus is the Lord of *all* things, and therefore one need not fear *anything*, includingdeath.

Note secondly that Thomas doesn’t even have to touch Jesus’ wounds. It is not the evidence, it is rather Jesus’ offer of *himself,* that brings Thomas to faith.

So Doubting Thomas becomes Believing Thomas when Jesus comes to him. And immediately his soul sprints way ahead of the other disciples in terms of the profound nature of his new-found faith.

The story isn’t really about doubt, it’s about faith. But even if we *do* focus on the doubt of Thomas – because, at the beginning of the story, Thomas does doubt – even if we *do* focus on the doubt of Thomas, we see that doubt isn’t such a bad thing. Indeed, doubt is a route to deeper faith. That’s the first point that I want to make this morning: Doubt is a route to deeper faith.

Not every Christian would agree with me. Many will say that doubt is a *horrible* thing; that *real* Christians don’t doubt. But I’m here to tell you that sometimes real Christians *do* doubt. Either that, or St. Mother Theresa wasn’t a real Christian. Some of her private ponderings reveal that she went through times of *considerable* doubt: about herself, about her work, about God. And yet she carried on the work. She continued to minister to the suffering and the dying of Calcutta. On some deep level her trust in God was so strong that it carried her through conditions that would’ve discouraged even the most saintly of saints; a faith so deep that it *overcame* her doubt; because sometimes doubt is on the surface, but faith is the foundation.

You see, the opposite of faith isn’t doubt; it’s indifference. You may doubt a particular doctrine. You may doubt the historical accuracy of a story in the Bible. You may even doubt the reality of God. But the fact that you doubt the *truth*fulness of something in the Bible means that you *do* have a passion for the *Truth*. God can work with that. My most profound time of doubt was my first year in seminary. I was studying for the ministry, and I wasn’t sure that I believed in God. Heck, I wasn’t sure that I believed in much of anything! In this state of extreme doubt, I went to talk with one of my professors. Dr. Stackhouse said, “You’re telling me what you *don’t* believe in; tell me what you *do* believe in: tell me the things whose reality you can’t deny.” So I got to thinking, “Well, I’m alive. I don’t doubt that. And the world is around me is real. And the world is beautiful. And when I step on the ground, it’s not likely to collapse beneath me. And somehow reality hangs together: the world, the solar system and the whole darn universe.” I put together all of those things that I didn’t doubt, and I found myself looking at a picture of reality whose coherence and complexity and beauty I couldn’t account for without factoring God into the equation. I found myself believing in God once again because I couldn’t deny the amazing reality of Creation. And my new faith in God was much stronger than my old juvenile faith that was left over from Sunday School. Nothing wrong with Sunday School faith, of course; just like there’s nothing wrong with so much of childhood. But as St. Paul says, in order to became an adult, one has to give-up childish things (1 Cor. 13:11). Doubt is a route to deeper faith. That’s what I mean by “faithful doubt.” One must be *skeptical* about some things in order to find a faith in the One who *undergirds* *all* things.

So, doubt is a route to deeper faith. But, this story isn’t really about doubt. It’s really a story about how Jesus meets us where we are. Thomas doubts, so Jesus comes to Thomas *in* his doubt and shows Thomas what he needs to see in order to come to Jesus. Jesus meets us where we are so that we can come to Jesus in faith.

A lot of Christians don’t understand this. They are so quick to pass judgment on others because of one’s theology, or doubt, or imperfections, or the social issues that one does nor does not stand for; so quick to pass judgment, and to warn of the dangers of *God’s* judgment. It’s as if they’re saying, “You don’t want to mess around with big, bad Jesus; he might cast you into the outer darkness!”

But that’s not the Jesus whom we see in this story. Jesus meets Thomas where he is. Jesus meets us where we are. No judgment; just acceptance. We might be painfully aware of all of our imperfections, but Jesus reaches out to us anyway. We might think that we’re dreadfully unworthy to come into Jesus’ presence, but Jesus beats us to the punch; *he* comes into *our* presence. No matter how dreadful a sinner you think you may be – and Lord knows that we’re all sinners – there is no barrier that can prevent Jesus from coming to you. He won’t leave you wallowing in your doubt or your pain or your self-pity. He loves you too much for that.

And when he does come to us, he offers himself to us. He reaches out to us with his wounded hands and he calls us by name: Mary, Thomas, Susan, Carol, Steve…please fill in your name: he reaches out his wounded hands to you, and embraces you.

Judgment – because we have doubts or we’re imperfect or we’ve failed in some way – judgment is not Jesus’ way. I’m reminded of a Christian homeless shelter and addiction recovery center whose rules were so strict that Jesus himself might’ve had trouble getting in; especially after changing all of that water into really good wine at the wedding reception in Cana. If you can’t get into an addiction program because you’re drunk, it kind of defeats the purpose of the program! And saying that your faith and your moral stature have to be pristine before coming to Jesus kind of defeats the purpose of Jesus. Who needs of Savior if you’re already perfect? But, of course, *none* of us is perfect. *All* of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But that’s okay, because Jesus meets us where we are. As the old hymn says, “Just as I am, without one plea…Just as I am, thy love unknown, has broken every barrier down…” Jesus meets us…where we are.

And where we are is a very wounded place. We all carry scars and open wounds from all of the painful things that life has thrown at us. But Jesus understands this. Because he’s wounded himself. The Risen Christ, you see, is the continuing presence of the *Crucified* One. It’s not just Jesus whom Thomas wants to see, but Jesus’ *wounds*. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,” he says, “I will not believe.” He *doesn’t* say, “Unless I hear his voice again.” Or, “Unless I look into his eyes again.” Or, “Unless I see him heal someone again.” What he *does* say is, “Unless I see his *wounds*, I will not believe.” And so Jesus shows him his hands, and his side. And by his wounds, Thomas is healed.

The Risen Christ is the continuing presence of the Crucified One, and by his wounds we are *all* healed. Jesus knew Thomas’ wounded heart, and Jesus knows *our* wounded hearts. Jesus knows how badly we all have been wounded. Disease, disappointment, death, betrayal: these and so many other things have left us scarred and bleeding. But life’s wounds make us God’s servants. That’s the ironic wisdom in Jesus’ identity as the Crucified Risen One. Life’s wounds make us God’s servants…when we’re willing to lean into the pain. Some of the most compassionate people that I’ve known have been people who have suffered greatly. But by leaning into their own pain, they have found the resources to bear the pain of others and bind-up their wounds. Like the 7 year old boy whose father abandoned his family in the middle of the Depression; the same boy who a few years later witnessed his Jewish neighbors screaming in agony as they learned the fate of the their relatives in Germany. So great was his pain that 70 years later as he told these stories he began to weep. This boy became a man who comforted others in their pain, and rescued troubled youth from lives of crime and violence. He would drop everything and be there for you in your hour of need.

The Crucified Risen One shows us the healing power of his wounds…and ours. But we can’t just talk about our pain; we have to *lean* into it. In the nearly 10 months that we’ve been together, I’ve been struck by the pain that’s been inflicted on this congregation: not just once, but many times. There was the loss of beloved members who left you all to form a new congregation 50 years ago. There was the betrayal of your trust and the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars in an embezzlement scandal that still cuts into your hearts. And since I now know you, and I love you, it cuts into my heart too. And there have been other heartbreaks in between these two: both in your own lives and in our collective life as a congregation.

Heartbreak hurts; but in the power of the Holy Spirit, it can also heal. There are many others in this community who have lost loved ones, who have lost money, who have lost jobs, who have lost hope; some of whom don’t have the faith community – the support community – that we have here. Perhaps we are called to meet these neighbors in their pain, just as Jesus has met us in ours; to meet them where they are, just as Jesus met Thomas where he was. I don’t know what kind of specific ministries this might mean, but I do know that whenever I’ve channeled my pain toward the healing of others, blessings have occurred. That’s the pain that others have inflicted upon me, and the painful awareness of my own imperfections.

It is through our own wounds that the Crucified One who is the Risen One brings healing. It’s like these lyrics penned by the late Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring;

Forget your perfect offering;

There’s a crack in everything:

That’s how the light gets in.

Thomas went on to spread Christianity to India. Legend has it that he was martyred in Madras in AD 53; martyred because he took money that was to be used to build a massive palace for a self-indulgent king, and Thomas used it instead to help some folks who were desperately in need. Such was the depth of the faith of Believing Thomas.

His doubt was a route to faith. Because Jesus met him where he was. And through the wounds of outstretched hands, the Crucified Risen One brought healing to Thomas, and to India, and even to you and me. By his wounds, and by ours, the healing power of the Risen Christ abounds. Amen.