

The Promise of Easter is a person

Sermon preached at The Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, April 3, 2016

The Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

*John 20:19-31 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."*

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is the ancient Easter acclamation of the church. There is a story about a Russian Orthodox church in the time of the Soviet Union. The Communists persecuted numerous groups in their society that didn't conform to their ideals, including the church. Atheist Communism sought to crush religious devotion as the "opiate of the masses." So a high ranking official in the Communist Party came to a worship service and took over the attention of the congregation. He got up and told the people that their beliefs were a lie, that they were following this religion in vain, and challenged them to prove otherwise. He sat down proud that he had snubbed this God with his enlightened thinking and defeated the authority of the church's message. In response, someone, perhaps the Orthodox priest, got up, turned to the crowd and simply said "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" and the congregation responded "The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

We are a people that care deeply about proof and reliability. We seek the data that is repeatable by the scientific method. This has become our test of the truth, and we are wise to be concerned with the truth. We don't want to follow feel-good sentimentality or put our trust in false hopes. The truth matters—even when the truth is inconvenient or when the truth challenges us. So we seek proof.

Every year, on the second Sunday of Easter, we hear the story of "Doubting Thomas." Here is this faithful apostle who is credited with bringing Christianity to India, and somehow he is only remembered for his doubts! But Thomas didn't simply doubt—he cared very much about the truth, and was willing to wrestle with the facts until he knew the truth.

On the day that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, Thomas was missing. Jesus spoke to his disciples and commissioned them to go out into the world, empowered by the

Holy Spirit to share the good news that they had witnessed. But their first audience was one of their closest friends, and one of their toughest converts. The disciples told Thomas “We have seen the Lord!” But Thomas answered “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas would accept nothing less than personal verification, by testing with his own fingers and his own hand.

By the way, don’t you wonder what that first week was like? Thomas was apparently still with the disciples that week—those excited fanatics declaring that Jesus was risen, and Thomas the skeptic, isolated in his disbelief!

I think we can understand Thomas. First of all, not many of us have seen someone rise from the dead—certainly not after three days! This is an unusual claim. And for us, this claim of resurrection, this claim of a living God who is involved in our daily lives, is a very unscientific claim. We cannot measure it in a test tube, or experiment on its repeatability. There are many wild claims out there in our culture, and many cheats and swindlers who are willing to deceive us. We need proof to believe. When we consider the question “who is Jesus, and did he really rise from the dead,” we come at a disadvantage—we were not there with the disciples. Like Thomas, we are taking the word of other witnesses. How many of you have put your fingers in the nail marks of Jesus’ hands or put your hand in the spear wound in his side? None of us have made that test.

But is such testing really the only measure of truth? Was that even the measure of truth for Thomas? Go back and read the passage. Did Thomas put his fingers in the nail marks and his hand in Jesus’ side? This Gospel account does not record it. Thomas saw Jesus (something few if any of us can claim), and Jesus invited Thomas to touch his hands and his side, but we do not read that Thomas actually took Jesus up on his offer. Jesus invites Thomas to implement his test of proof, but instead, Thomas simply responds with a claim stronger than any other claim made by the disciples to this point, he responds by claiming “My Lord and my God!”

What caused Thomas to make such a claim? Wasn’t verifiable testing the most important issue for him? Or was it? Is proof really what Thomas wanted? Is proof the most important issue for us?

I think that there is more to Thomas’ story and more to our story. Think about what Thomas went through up to the point when he heard reports of Jesus rising from the dead. When Jesus was captured, beaten and crucified, his followers were astounded and bewildered. They fled and scattered. All they had hoped for, all the miraculous signs, all the healing, all the glimpses of the Kingdom of God were lost. They had believed. They had left their nets and followed. Now their lives were in danger, and their Lord was dead. He who could have silenced his opponents was gone. He who healed the sick and lame did not save himself. For such broken people, words about Jesus rising may have fallen like another line of false hopes.

Perhaps Thomas wasn’t so much a scientist, demanding evidence. Perhaps Thomas was where so many of us have been: betrayed, wounded, bereft of hope, bereft of trust. Like the child whose negligent Father shows up after years of absence, we are too broken to believe, too hurt to trust

again, too sad to feel joy. Perhaps Thomas felt the way we feel when we are just too jaded to open up to the crowd that talks about a risen messiah and a new life.

What is the promise in such circumstances? What happens to us when we shut out opportunities to heal or to seek God's presence?

What happens now is what happened to Thomas. In the midst of pain and denial, through doors closed and locked, *God breaks in!* Even though Thomas could have trusted his friends and believed, even though Thomas could have come to God, *God came to him* and broke down the barriers of his resistance. Caught up in our pain and denial, God comes to us and shows us true reality: 'touch my hands and my side, see how I have suffered like you have suffered, see the wounds I have borne for you, see the length to which I will go to gather you into my arms and heal your sorrow! Peace be with you! Do not be faithless, but be faithful! Believe, and through believing, have life in my name.'

God's power and presence is often known in difficult times. In times of sickness, we experience God's healing. In times of guilt, we receive God's forgiveness. In times of loss, we feel God's grace. In times of conflict, we discover God's reconciliation. In times of doubt, we discover the truth about God.

The promise of Easter is not proof. The promise of Easter is a person. What changed Thomas was not the testing that he said was required to believe. What changed Thomas was a personal encounter with Jesus. You and I have the opportunity for that same kind of personal encounter with Jesus. Yes, we must test the record to be sure that the testimony of others is reliable—that the Christian faith is based on the truth of history and not on fiction. But what changes our hearts and minds—what brings us new life is a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We may not have access to Jesus' body in the way that Thomas did. But we have access to that same personal encounter with Jesus. The promise of Easter is a person; the promise of Easter is a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

This is the life-changing relationship that defied the Soviet atheist. This is the life-changing relationship that is more powerful than any personal tragedy we face. This is the new life that stirs within us the same joy as we join with those Russian Orthodox believers and our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world as we declare "Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!"