

LIFE AND FAITH

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 7, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31. Just to get our bearings for where we are chronologically in the story of Jesus, the first part of this account continues the story of that first Easter Sunday. It's the first time that most of the disciples saw Jesus after his resurrection. The second part jumps to the next week, when Thomas sees the risen Jesus for the first time. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 20, beginning at verse 19, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, **“Peace be with you.”** ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”**

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, **“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”** ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Let's talk about doubt and unbelief.

There is a lot in this passage that we could spend our time on. We get this passage every year as the gospel lesson for the Second Sunday of Easter. Typically, the readings rotate on a three-year cycle. But we hear this one every year on this Sunday. And that works out pretty well, because there is so much here we can talk about.

Of course, we can talk more about Jesus' resurrection. When he appeared to his disciples on these two occasions, he proved that he really did rise from the dead. The wounds in his hands and side prove that he is the same man who was crucified three days earlier.

We can talk about the peace that Jesus made between God and man. Three times he says, **"Peace be with you"** (20:19, 21, 26). And the wounds in his hands and side remind us what he did on the cross to make peace between God and man.

We can talk about the gift of the Holy Spirit, and how it wasn't really at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit was given to Christians, but on the evening of Jesus' resurrection, seven weeks before Pentecost. This teaches us that the Holy Spirit does not always manifest himself in signs and wonders. Sometimes he does. But, also in the ordinary, what we might even think of as the mundane times of life, the Holy Spirit is constantly with us to protect and preserve us in the true faith.

We can talk about absolution. Jesus gave his Church authority on earth to forgive sins. He paid for our debt on the cross, and he authorized us to declare that forgiveness to one another and to the whole world.

But this morning we're going to think about Thomas, how he refused to believe, and how Jesus engaged him to overcome his unbelief.

First, we should acknowledge that everyone has doubts. That includes pastors. It includes saints who have been growing in their baptismal faith for ninety years. It includes those who appear very strong in the faith. If anyone says they never doubt the Christian faith, they are either a perfect person or a liar. And, aside from Jesus, there are no perfect persons, not yet, anyway. So every Christian experiences doubts. They might be moments when we just think, *Really? That seems hard to believe.* Or we might experience seasons of doubts when, for extended periods of time, we feel very weak in our faith. Or there may be certain points of doctrine that we struggle with for most or all of our lives. Every Christian experiences doubt.

Doubts are not good. I don't want to give you that impression. But they are common. And what's worse than having doubts is pretending that we don't. Because then we're just putting on a show for others, ourselves, or God, and we wouldn't be getting treatment for our doubts. We can think of doubts like a spiritual health condition. Similar to a mental or physical health condition, we don't want to have them, so we might ignore them, but that just leaves them untreated, and they might grow into a serious problem.

Sometimes, in the broader world of Christianity, I hear other Christians say that doubts are actually a good thing. And it seems like that idea is becoming more common. At first, it was something that liberal Christians would say. And I mean "liberal" in the theological sense, not necessarily politically. I suppose it's to be expected, because the very definition of a theological liberal is someone who does not accept all Scripture as authoritative or historically accurate. But even among evangelicals, we're starting to hear more of them say that doubts are a good thing. Part of it is a reaction against the pressure they felt to hide their doubts. They say that, growing up in the church, they felt like they couldn't ask the hard questions. They felt forced to pretend that they didn't have any doubts. And I can't really say if their perception of that is right or wrong. We're not in a place to judge what their pastors, parents, or youth leaders did. We weren't there. But it does remind me that, in the Church, we need to have an openness to questions, especially the tough questions. We need to allow people to express their doubts without judging them.

It can be a delicate balance to welcome Christians to ask questions and express their doubts without saying that doubts are good or even okay. Doubts are normal and common, but they're not good or even okay. God does not desire that we should be in doubt. That's why I think it's helpful to think of them as a spiritual health condition. We should think of spiritual health, and mental health for that matter, similar to how we think of physical health. If your finger is infected and starting to smell, you know that you need to see a doctor. If you don't, your finger can die, the infection can spread, and your whole body can die. You go to the doctor, tell them what's going on, and they don't judge you for your sick finger. They're not going to tell you that your finger is okay. That would be a terrible thing to do. They treat you with honesty and compassion, and they try to heal your finger.

And that's the way that pastors, church leaders, and parents should deal with questions and doubts. You are welcome to ask questions. In Bible study, I actually prefer your questions over whatever I might plan for Bible study, because, when you ask questions, you help me to know what I need to address. Some questions, you might not feel comfortable asking them in a group. And that's okay. I sincerely hope you will ask me privately and give me an opportunity to help you. And if your doubt doesn't go away, I hope you will ask me again, and again, and again. Think of a pastor, whether it's me or someone else, like a spiritual doctor. Pastors are called to care for souls. I know that every Christian has questions and doubts. So when someone comes to me and says, "I'm having a hard time accepting this doctrine," or, "I have doubts about this part of the Bible," I immediately respect them for their honesty, because I know that every Christian experiences that.

Sometimes people come in a hostile manner. In those moments it's harder, but still important, for me to be gentle. So even if you come with a hostile attitude, I will try to be gentle. And if I fail, you have permission to tell me that I have to be gentle and respectful to you. Because my calling is not to fight you, but to care for your soul.

So the Church has to welcome questions and doubts without saying that doubts are good, much like a hospital welcomes the sick, without calling sickness good.

So there's a balance or a line that we have to hold somewhere. And it's this. We welcome questions and doubts, but we cannot tolerate teachers who cast doubt on the Scripture. You are welcome to express doubts about the creation account, but we should not tolerate a pastor or teacher who says that the earth is billions of years old or that we descended from prehistoric bacteria. You are welcome to say that you don't really understand how Baptism can save or how the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper can really be the body and blood of Jesus. But a pastor or teacher is not free to say they are merely symbols, because that contradicts the words of Scripture. You are welcome to ask if Mary was really a virgin when Jesus was conceived, but the Church should not tolerate a pastor who says, "Well, you know, kids do things, and there were lots of Roman soldiers around. We don't really know what happened." You are welcome to ask, "How can I be sure that Jesus rose from the dead?" But there are pastors who say, "I don't know if Jesus rose bodily from the dead, and it doesn't really matter; what really matters is how the story impacts our faith." The Church can never tolerate that from her teachers. And it's not hard to find pastors who cast doubt on these teachings of Scripture, even the virgin birth or bodily resurrection.

We must welcome questions and doubts, but we cannot accept teachers who cast doubt on the Scriptures. Here's the difference: When you ask questions or express your doubts, that's an opportunity for healing. When pastors or teachers cast doubt on the teachings of Scripture, they are releasing a false toxin into the community. It's the exact opposite of what God calls us to do.

We really do have good, reasonable answers for the objections people have to the Christian faith. Whether it's the existence of God, the creation of the world, the problem of evil, or the bodily resurrection of Jesus, we really do have reasonable answers, so we should invite people to ask their questions and express their doubts.

God deals with doubters in a gentle manner. He even deals with unbelievers in a gracious way.

Consider Thomas. Thomas was not present on the evening of Jesus' resurrection, when he first appeared to this large group of disciples. The first part of this gospel reading took place on that first Easter Sunday. A few of Jesus' disciples, like the women who went to the tomb (Matt. 28:8-10) and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), had seen Jesus already. But most of the disciples had not yet seen him, and they had doubts about the reports of the others (Luke 24:11). But when they were all together, Jesus came and stood among them (John 20:19). He showed them his hands and his side (20:20). He proved to them that he really did rise from the dead in bodily form.

Thomas, however, was not there. And even when all of the other disciples insisted that they had seen the risen Jesus, Thomas refused to believe. And I want you to notice how adamant Thomas was. He said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (20:25). From this, he gets the nickname "Doubting Thomas." But Thomas wasn't a doubter. He was an unbeliever. A doubter is someone who believes, but they have doubts, or they feel weak in their faith. But Thomas was not that. He flat out refused to believe. He was, for one week, an unbeliever.

And it's not that Thomas was weaker than any of the others. He wasn't worse than any of us. He just wanted to see it for himself. And we can understand why. He knew that Jesus died on Good Friday. He may have even been there at the cross to watch him die. It would be hard to believe that he's alive again. In our modern arrogance, we sometimes think of the ancients as ignorant or superstitious. But in many respects, especially concerning death, the ancients were far more grounded in reality than we are. When someone died, it was the family or friends who had to deal with the body. But we have funeral homes to deal with the body while we watch fictional TV shows where people are presumed dead but reappear, and we play video games where, if you die, you just respawn. If anyone is gullible enough to think that dead people come back to life, it would be us. The ancients were much more grounded in reality. They were hard converts, so it's really significant that so many of them believed that Jesus rose from the dead. They had to be convinced by hard proof.

So we can also understand why Thomas demanded hard evidence. It's understandable, but that does not mean it was good. He had witnessed Jesus perform miracles, including raising others from the dead. He had heard Jesus prophesy that he would die and rise again. He should have believed his many friends when they reported the resurrection to him. So it's not good, but we can understand why he refused to believe.

But the next Sunday, all the disciples were gathered together again. This time, Thomas was with them. And Jesus came and stood among them again (20:26). He singled out Thomas. And I can't read Jesus' tone, but I don't think it was any kind of rebuke. Instead, he answers Thomas' unbelief. He says, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe" (20:27). This is exactly what Thomas demanded the week before. And Jesus gave it to him. We don't know if Thomas actually touched Jesus' hands

and side, but he got the hard evidence he demanded. It was wrong of Thomas to require it, but Jesus gave him what he needed. So Thomas finally confesses, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).

This is a picture of how Jesus deals with doubters, even unbelievers. He welcomes you. He does not wish to condemn you for your doubts. Instead, he desires to heal them. He wasn't okay with Thomas remaining in unbelief. He commanded him, “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Nor does Jesus desire for us to hold onto our doubts. They're not good, but Jesus understands that we have them. So he invites us to confess them. And the Church has to welcome questions and doubts so that we can heal them.

Thomas got what he needed. And we might want the same thing, for Jesus to stand among us and prove himself to us. But he's not going to do that. Or I should say, he *probably* will not do that, because he has given us his word, so that we would believe the testimony of those eyewitnesses who did see Jesus. So he says to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (20:27).

Then John closes this section by saying, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). We might not get a physical appearance. But that's not the only objective and hard evidence. History is an objective study. Based on the testimony of witnesses in the past, we can have certainty concerning historical events, things that we did not see with our eyes. The historical case for the resurrection is incredibly strong. If you doubt the truthfulness of Scripture, if you doubt the Christian faith, I would encourage you to study the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection.

I have doubts. There are times when I ask myself, *Am I wasting my life preaching this gospel? Am I a fool for believing this stuff?* You want to know what I do when my mind goes there? I pray, “I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). And I ask myself, *Did Jesus rise from the dead?* I don't ask myself, *Do I believe this?* Because my faith doesn't prove anything. But I ask, *Did Jesus rise from the dead?* And I know the answer to that is *yes*, even if my faith is weak. Because I know there is evidence. I know the testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses. I know that many of them suffered persecution and death for their eyewitness testimony. I know that it is reasonable to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, even when I feel like my faith is weak. So don't worry too much about your faith. Don't let your doubts pull you into unbelief. Rather, focus on what we know.

And know that your doubts are included among the sins that Jesus died for. It was wrong for Thomas to doubt Jesus. We can understand it, because we are also sinful humans, but it was still wrong. But Jesus did not condemn Thomas. Jesus had just paid for that sin on the cross. So he dealt graciously with Thomas. He showed him the holes in his hands and his side, proving that he really is risen from the dead, and he really did pay for Thomas' sin. We may not get to see Jesus' hands and side, at least not yet. But this eyewitness testimony is written for us so that we would believe, just like the first disciples did, that Jesus really is risen from the dead, and he really has paid for our sins. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.