

“Seeing and Believing”
John 20:19-31
Sunday, May 1, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Johnny Carson once visited Harvard University to receive an award. After the ceremony he agreed to answer some questions from members of the press. One reporter asked, "What would you like to have inscribed on your tombstone?" Carson thought for just a second. Then he answered with the words he used before every commercial break on his television show. He wanted his tombstone to say, "I'll be right back."

The Apostle Thomas wishes that Jesus would “be right back.” But Thomas has witnessed Jesus rise to a place where crowds love him and clamor for him. And then, in the end, he has seen Jesus crucified as a criminal.

No wonder Thomas feels fear and cynicism. No wonder he has doubts.

Earlier in John’s gospel, Thomas comes across as much more of a believer. Let’s take a look.

I. The Biblical Passage

In John’s first reference to Thomas, the disciple acts with courageous devotion. Chapter 11 verse 16 shows his great love for Lazarus, one of Jesus’ closest friends. When Jesus wants to go to see Lazarus, who has died, Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Thomas joins Jesus in his grief.

The symbolism of John’s gospel also suggests that Thomas is literally ready to die with Lazarus. And, since the story of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death and resurrection, the implication is that Thomas is also ready to die with Jesus.

In John's second reference to Thomas, the disciple is shown to be theologically alert. He is able to discuss the faith with Jesus. John 14:3-5 begins with Jesus saying, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas replies, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas' genuine question allows Jesus to teach the disciples further, saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." One role Thomas plays among the disciples is that of asking insightful theological questions.

In addition to these biblical accounts of Thomas, he is also remembered as the supposed author of the Gospel of Thomas. This is a non-biblical account of some of the sayings of Jesus. Thomas is also remembered by many as the man responsible for the earliest Christian mission to India. And, in today's reading, he declares that Jesus is, "My Lord and my God." Nowhere else in scripture is Jesus so directly addressed as "God."

Writes Dorothy Sayers, in her book, The Man Born to Be King: "It is unexpected, but extraordinarily convincing, that the one absolutely unequivocal statement in the whole gospel of the Divinity of Jesus should come from Doubting Thomas. It is the only place where the word God is used without qualification of any kind, and in the most unambiguous form of words. And he does not say it ecstatically, or with a cry of astonishment but with flat conviction, as of one acknowledging irrefutable evidence that $2 + 2 = 4$, that the sun is in the sky. Thomas says, you are my Lord and my God!"

With all these positive reports, the label "Doubting Thomas" still sticks. He is compared to the beloved disciple who believes upon seeing the empty tomb. And to Mary Magdalene who

believes upon hearing her name spoken. And to the other disciples who believe upon seeing the risen Christ.

Unlike them, Thomas must touch Jesus in order to believe. Or at least this is what he thinks. The biblical account never says that he actually does touch Jesus before proclaiming his faith. But just the fact that he demands that kind of proof has won him the title of “Doubting Thomas.”

Frederick Buechner defends Thomas and his doubts. Buechner writes, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

I love that image: “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith.” Delightful!

Maybe in spite of Doubting Thomas’s tarnished reputation he can show us some ways to stay awake and moving in our faith journeys, too.

II. Doubt and Responsibility

First of all, the story is a word of grace for us. Christians often have doubts, and sometimes we feel anxious or guilty about this. If we had real faith, we would never doubt, or so we feel. Intellectually, we may know this isn’t true; but deep down in our guts, we fear that it is.

To know that one of the disciples, who saw Jesus and lived with him for three years, also had doubts and yet finally believed is reassuring. Because of Thomas we can better accept our own times of doubt. We don’t have to leave the church because we have questions. We don’t have to hide our doubts from other Christians who seem to have stronger faith than we do. We can proclaim our doubts to one another as Thomas proclaimed his doubts to the other disciples.

By acknowledging our doubts we can help others to clarify and strengthen their beliefs. And we can leave it up to God to confirm our faith at crucial moments of need.

Secondly, the story gives reason for Thomas to fear. For one thing, Jesus is dead, Thomas's hero has been martyred, and society is against him and the other disciples. Grief makes belief extremely difficult. Thomas is focused on the death of his friend and leader. He is unable to accept that ray of hope which the resurrection offers.

In addition, if the resurrection is true, then Thomas has a huge responsibility to fulfill. Jesus died and was raised. Christians through baptism die to their old lives and are raised with Christ into newness of life. Fear on Thomas's part is understandable. If the resurrection is true, nothing is the same. If the resurrection is true, his life will be more difficult, more demanding. If the resurrection is true, Thomas must take up his cross and follow Jesus. If, on the other hand, the resurrection is not true, then he can retreat into a safe, quiet grief.

Stephen Muncherian retells a traditional story about the church's temptation to shirk our post-resurrection responsibilities:

“On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a life-saving station. The building was primitive and there was just one boat. But, the members of the life-saving station were committed and kept a constant watch over the sea. When a ship went down, they unselfishly went out day or night to save the lost. Because so many lives were saved by that station, it became famous.

“Consequently, many people wanted to be associated with the station to give their time, talent, and money to support its important work. New boats were bought. New crews were recruited. As membership in the life-saving station grew, some of the members became

concerned that the building was so primitive and that the equipment was so outdated. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in a newly constructed building.

“The life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They met regularly and when they did, they greeted each other, hugged each other, and shared with one another the events that had been going on in their lives. But fewer members were now interested in going on life-saving missions.

“As the years passed the new station evolved into a place to meet regularly for fellowship, for committee meetings, and for special training sessions about their mission. But few went out to the drowning people. So another life-saving station was founded further down the coast.

“History continues to repeat itself. If you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of adequate meeting places with ample parking and plush carpeting. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

“May we never forget the reality of our calling as Christians and as the Church of the resurrected Jesus Christ.”

Christian responsibility. It means many changes in Thomas’s life. No wonder he fears this. No wonder Thomas wants proof of the resurrection before he will take action.

III. Holy Spirit Clarity

Well, finally, the story of Thomas shows how proof and power comes to Christians. It doesn’t come through touching the hands and the feet and the side of the resurrected body of Jesus. However, it begins when we acknowledge – as did Thomas! – that Jesus did suffer and die for us on the cross. We see and we grieve the nails in his hands and feet, the spear-gash in his side.

It's like a certain medieval monk, who announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say.

We must acknowledge the sacrifice that has been made for us.

But the full proof and power comes when God sends the Holy Spirit to convince hearts and to empower action. "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.'"

This is John's version of the Pentecost story. Before the Holy Spirit comes, Thomas and the other disciples see Jesus, live with Jesus, but do not understand. They do not truly see and believe in him. They pass on the stories which will become the biblical accounts of Jesus' life; but they do not preach the gospel.

After the Holy Spirit comes, Thomas and the disciples see with their hearts and believe through the grace of God and have power to boldly preach the gospel. That same Holy Spirit is available to us today, just as it was to Thomas and to the other disciples.

Writes Thomas G. Long in his book, Whispering The Lyrics:

"Check out the church ads on the religion page of the Saturday edition of most big city newspapers and you find some impressive sounding places of worship. There, with sleek graphics and Madison Avenue phrases, a few select churches boast of their assets -- their choirs,

their friendliness, their powerful preaching, their singles ministries, their ample parking, their family life centers, their sensitive child care, and their compassionate spirit. Some churches, it seems, have it all.

“Other churches, however, appear by contrast to have nothing, absolutely nothing. Take, for example, the church depicted in our text for today. Here, we get our first glimpse of the disciples gathered together after the resurrection; the first glimpse, in other words, of the church in its earliest days, and, all in all, it is not a very pretty picture. Near the end of his life, Jesus had carefully prepared his disciples to be a devoted and confident fellowship of faith. They were to be a community of profound love with the gates wide open and the welcome mat always out, but here we find them barricaded in a house with the doors bolted shut. They were to be the kind of people who stride boldly into the world to bear fruit in Jesus' name, a people full of the Holy Spirit performing even greater works than Jesus himself (John 14:12), but here we find them cowering in fear, hoping nobody will find out where they are before they get their alibis straight. In short, we see here the church at its worst -- scared, disheartened and defensive. If this little sealed-off group of Christians were to place one of those cheery church ads in the Saturday newspaper, what could it possibly say? ‘The friendly church where all are welcome?’ Hardly, unless one counts locked doors as a sign of hospitality. ‘The church with a warm heart and a bold mission?’ Actually more like the church with sweaty palms and a timid spirit.

“Indeed, John's gospel gives us a snapshot of a church with nothing – no plan, no promise, no program, no perky youth ministry, no powerful preaching, no parking lot, nothing. In fact, when all is said and done, this terrified little band huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the door has only one thing going for it: the risen Christ. And that seems to be the main point of this story. In the final analysis, this is a story about how the risen Christ

pushed open the bolted door of a church with nothing, how the risen Christ enters the fearful chambers of every church and fills the place with his own life.”

Closing.

The story of Thomas calls us to responsibility, to new life, to the preaching of the gospel. But that call is surrounded with grace – grace which understands and forgives our doubts, and grace which sends the Holy Spirit to convince and to empower. Jesus says to Thomas, with love, “Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas responds, saying, “My Lord and my God!” There is a happy ending for Thomas.

Malcolm Muggeridge comments profoundly on what it means to see with the heart rather than with the eyes. I close with this quotation:

“Precisely how a man nailed to a cross 2,000 years ago, who claimed to be the Son of God, came to signify reality, in contradiction to the sawdust men of destiny with their fraudulent wars and revolutions and liberations, is something that can be understood, but not explained. You either see it or you don’t.”

Thomas finally sees with his heart, believing without the need to touch Jesus. A deeply joyful surprise for skeptical Thomas. A legacy of grace and hope for all of us Doubting Thomases down through the ages.

“Through believing,” may you “have life in his name.”

Amen.