

Sermon for 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
March 30, 2008

Scriptures: 1 Peter 1:3-9  
John 20:19-31

### “The Faith of Thomas”

“Doubting Thomas,” the phrase automatically comes to mind whenever Thomas’ name is mentioned. Poor Thomas, what a legacy to leave – his name tied to all our efforts to stifle any open, honest dissent, to squelch any difficult, probing questions. “Don’t be a doubting Thomas” is flung in exasperation at anyone who stands in the way of a desired course of action, or who questions a cherished belief. How unfortunate. We slander Thomas often not in the interest of truth, but to protect our version of truth from any challenge. What makes it all the more unfortunate is that it is slander. There is much more to Thomas than his insistence on seeing and touching Jesus’ wounds.

There is the Thomas of courage. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was dying, and finally decided to go to Jerusalem, where he knew he was a wanted man with a death sentence hanging over him, Thomas said to the other disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

There is the Thomas who wants to be certain that he understands the call of Christ, so that he can be faithful. So when Jesus says that he is going to prepare a place for his disciples, and will come again and gather them to himself, and tells them that they know where he is going, Thomas answers, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

Then there is the Thomas who faithfully carried out the Great Commission to go and make disciples among all the nations. “The Acts of Thomas,” is an Apocryphal book dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Common Era. It tells how Thomas was sent to India as the slave of an Indian merchant. There he founded a Christian community. The Mar Thoma Church in India traces its origins to the community evangelized by Thomas. How fitting that this one to whom Jesus showed his wounds, would in the wounded state of slavery, share the Good News.

Finally there is Thomas’ response to Jesus’ offer to allow him to touch the wounds and feel the realness of Christ’s presence. Thomas replies, “My Lord and my God.” There is no greater Christological affirmation in all of the New Testament. Jesus is often called Lord, but for a Jew to say Lord and God is truly remarkable. It took the Christian community several decades to come to terms with Jesus’ relationship to God. In the end Christianity accepted this affirmation of Thomas. Jesus is indeed Lord and God.

So I hope that if you have equated Thomas with deficient faith, that from now on you will realize how unfair such a designation is.

Thomas’ faith emerges out of Thomas’ insistence upon truth telling. Thomas is willing to speak the truth even when it is hard. Even when it is unpleasant, even when it might spoil the desire for a perfect picture, Thomas embraces the truth. If we go to Jerusalem, we will be in danger, we may die. Let us go. Jesus, you know far more about what you are doing than do we. You know where you are going; we do not. Tell us.

Thomas refuses to sugarcoat anything. Jesus has been crucified; he is dead. I must see the wounds. And far from Jesus demonstrating that Thomas lacked faith and was on the wrong path, Jesus came to him where he was, and revealed that Thomas was a true disciple

with a true faith. To truly know the risen Lord, we have to recognize his woundedness.

We Protestants make a big deal of the fact that the crosses, which adorn our sanctuaries, are empty. We do so as a witness to the resurrection. If, however, the resurrected Christ, whom we worship, no longer bears (bares) his wounds – and I say bears b-e-a-r-s – to carry, and bares b-a-r-e-s – to show forth, at the same time, if the resurrected Christ whom we worship no longer bears (bares) his wounds, then our cross is indeed empty, and has little ability to speak hope to a wounded world.

So Thomas, in his searching, provides us with an experience of the risen Christ that is so important for our experience and faith. We see plenty of woundedness; we need to be able to see Jesus present in that kind of experience.

We have spent the past couple of months acknowledging our congregational experience of loss and woundedness. Session has spent time reflecting upon the effects of this congregation's losses on Session's work and leadership. Those who gathered on Wednesday evenings during Lent, spent time thinking about emotions associated with grief, which comes as a result of loss, and hearing Biblical passages that give voice to such emotions and that offer reassurance in the face of loss. This was time well spent; it was a Lenten journey that intentionally gave us time to consider our woundedness as we were remembering Christ's wounds.

Now it is Easter, and with Thomas, aware of the wounds which are very much a part of our experience, it is time to explore our faith, our trust in Christ in spite of those wounds. In the presence of his own doubt and fear, seeing Christ's wounds, Thomas nevertheless said, "My Lord and my God." Faith is not pretending everything is fine, faith is trusting God in the very presence of enemies, in the

shadow of death. Faith is trusting when we have acknowledged that things are not perfect.

Over the next few months, we will be intentionally listening for God's call. We will be assessing our opportunities and our readiness to be used by God to do even more than we have done to bring Good News and healing to those whom God has placed in our circle of care. This will involve work with the Session, developing a plan for a mission study, and the carrying out of that study. Every member of the congregation will be given opportunities to be involved in this work. It can be an exciting time of growing in faith as we seek to open ourselves to a greater awareness of who we are, of our gifts for ministry, of the needs among us and around us, and of Christ's call and empowering Spirit.

We, like Thomas, will need to seek the truth, will need an honest assessment of our reality, and then trusting in the risen Christ, we too may come with Thomas to a faith filled declaration of readiness to follow our Lord in all the paths he lays before us. I look forward to this time of working with you to discern God's call. I hope you will pray much for the leaders you have chosen, encourage them and support and respond to their leading. We have a good deal of important work to do together, but as we spend time planning and then gathering and listening to one another and to God's Spirit, we will find that God is faithful, and does give us everything that we need.

Thanks be to God!