

10th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

John 20:19-29

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.'

As we begin to approach the end of our Unraveled summer sermon series, it occurs to me that there has been a lot of doubting in the stories that we've journeyed through these past two and a half months.

Sara doubted that she would ever get pregnant in her old age. So she laughed when the angel told her it was time to go shopping for maternity wear.

Peter started to walk on water, and then he started doubting, and he sank until Jesus saved him.

Moses doubted his abilities to stand up to Pharaoh, and yet God used him to deliver the Israelites from captivity.

And yet, the funny thing is, we don't call Sara "Doubting Sara" or Peter "Doubting Peter." Last time I checked, I've never heard someone refer to Moses as "Doubting Moses." Yet, for some reason, nearly two millennia later, we still are taught to refer to Thomas as "Doubting Thomas."

What a shame.

It's just not fair when you think about it. How many of us would shudder to think that one moment of doubt might singularly define us so many years after the fact? Lord knows I've had plenty of moments of doubt in my lifetime. Heck, I had plenty of moments of doubt this week!

I doubt the direction our country is in.

I doubt the courage of our politicians to do the right thing; the moral thing.

I doubt my abilities as a pastor, a husband, as a preacher and teacher.

And, you know what, I doubt God sometimes. There have been times that, because of my doubt, I've stuck myself on the boat watching a braver disciple journey out onto the stormy waters. There have been times that my doubt has caused me to speak up when I should have stayed silent and to stay silent when I should have spoken up.

So, let's remove the stigma, shall we? Doubt is not something to be ashamed of, it's something to learn from. The largest moments of learning in my life have been during times of my deepest doubt. Without doubt, I believe there can be no true faith. Faith is about living *with* doubt, not pretending it doesn't exist.

So, let's cut Thomas a break for heaven's sake. Enough with the condescending monikers. Enough with the doubt-shaming. Enough with stupid argument that if you doubt less God will give you more. Enough! Let's look at this passage with fresh eyes and let's redeem our friend, Thomas.

Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the rest of the disciples. We don't know where he was, we only know that he *wasn't* fearfully locked in a room, too scared to walk outside. Maybe he was going for a stroll to process his grief at the death of his friend and savior. Maybe he was tired of hiding. Maybe he was going out to get some food to feed his friends whose fears kept them frozen, fettered, and famished.

All we know is that Thomas wasn't there. He didn't get the benefit of seeing Jesus the way his other friends did. They saw Jesus' body and he didn't. And so, when Thomas came back, he needed proof because, you know, HE'S HUMAN! And, honestly, who among us can blame him? Who among us can honestly say that they wouldn't have demanded proof had they been in Thomas' shoes. It's easy for us to say we wouldn't have doubted, but the fact is we have 2,000 years of telling the story of Jesus' resurrection that Thomas didn't have access to.

So, when Thomas returns, the disciples preach the second ever Christian sermon to him, they say "We have seen the Lord." I say it's the "second" Christian sermon because the first one was preached by Mary a few verses prior ("I have seen the Lord!"). After hearing this sermon, this testament to the resurrection, Thomas does not believe. It's just too much to take in at once without physical proof in front of him. It would have been a hard enough thing to take in under the best of circumstances but let us not forget that Thomas is grieving. Thomas has experienced trauma. He has witnessed the violent death of his friend. He is grieving. And grief obscures reality. Grief makes us numb and separates us from the reality of the love around us. Thomas' grief was likely a factor in his doubt.

He demands proof. And he doesn't just demand any proof. He demands a very specific proof. He demands not just to see Jesus' body but explicitly asks to *see his wounds*. It's all about the scars. Thomas doesn't doubt that his friends saw someone. Perhaps he doesn't even doubt that his friends saw Jesus. But, for Thomas, he wants to know that the Jesus that they saw is not some white-washed Jesus devoid of the suffering that made his savior his *human* savior. Thomas wanted to see the scars because, for him, the suffering of Christ meant something.

You see, Thomas' grief was so real. He needed something equally as real to heal it.

And so, Thomas looked for the marks. Some people want a resurrection with no crucifixion. Some people want to skip all that messy stuff during Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and fast forward to the joy of Easter. But the joy of Easter is empty without the journey of the days before it. Thomas, for whatever reason, wanted to hold the two in tension with each other. He wanted a resurrection that didn't gloss over the brokenness of the world. Thomas looked for the marks.

And other folks are looking for the marks as well.¹ You see, there are many people out in the world who are looking for the marks on Jesus' hands and the mark on his side where the spear pierced him. Because those marks are marks of proof that Jesus' did not remain at a safe distance from the brokenness and suffering of the world.

My New Testament professor, Elizabeth Johnson, says the following of today's story:

"People are waiting to see the marks. They are not looking for the marks in Jesus' hands and side anymore. They wait instead to see the marks of the Church - the wounds in our hands and our sides - the evidence that we are really connected to the Jesus who was crucified and raised...

"The marks that matter today are not the ones in Jesus' hands and side, but the ones in our communities....So many of the stories we hear of people without faith include their disillusionment with the church as we know it, our failure to make real what we profess.

"What people are looking for, at heart, is some legitimate and trustworthy connection with the Divine... John says...that we find it in the wounded body of Jesus."²

Thomas found his faith in the wounded body of Jesus. Thomas saw the scars and believed. Thomas saw the scars that left their violent mark on the innocent body of Jesus and says, with holy awe, "My Lord and my God!"

We here at Beaumont Presbyterian Church do not proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ as if it magically removes the pain of the world. We don't sing the alleluias as if the kyries don't exist. Because of Thomas' insistence that we bear witness to the scars of Christ's body, it means that we - the Body of Christ - must bear witness to those scars as well. We bear witness to these scars by acknowledging the frank reality that there are wounded folks all around us and among us.

Because of Thomas' insistence, I'm reminded that we must not only proclaim the resurrection in the comfort of our sanctuary but in the discomfort of the wounded places in the world around us.

We proclaim the resurrection in the hospital waiting room.

We proclaim the resurrection in a Walmart in El Paso, a bar in Dayton, and a garlic festival in California.

¹ With many thanks to my New Testament Professor, Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Johnson for this insight in *Feasting on the Gospels*.

² Jarvis, Cynthia A., and E. Elizabeth. Johnson. *Feasting on the Gospels*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

We proclaim the resurrection in the offices of the politicians who worship power instead of peace.

We proclaim the resurrection in the midst of those who bear the scars placed on their bodies by racism, lack of affordable healthcare, and economic disparity.

We proclaim the resurrection in the places where many of us choose to avoid because our privilege allows us to pretend as if it all doesn't exist.

You see, there are many Thomas' around us, that are looking for the scars on the Body of Christ, A.K.A. the Church. And we have a choice. We can hide those scars or we can show them. We can hide the scars of the resurrection by providing empty worship where people can come to feel good about themselves and temporarily escape the brokenness of the world. That brand of Christianity is one of the reasons that denominations such as ours having been in sharp decline for decades. Many people, especially younger folks like me, have become rather adept at sniffing out the churches that hide the scars of the resurrection; the ones that are far more interested with making people comfortable than inviting them into the inconvenient world of discipleship.

Or, instead of hiding our scars, we can show them. We can acknowledge the scars of Christ by standing with other scarred folks and prophetically calling out and condemning the sources of those scars. Because if Christ ignored his scars, then we could justify ignoring the scars of others. But Christ does not give us such convenience. Instead, like our faithful friend, Thomas, we will bear witness to the scars by leaving this place and doing the work of God.

Like Thomas, we will not be locked in this room in fear. We will leave this room, this time, with the proof that we need. We gather as doubters and leave, not without doubt, but *with* resurrection hope! Doubt is what drives us forward. Doubt is what keeps us taking courageous steps "out of the boat" in order to follow our savior boldly. Doubt and faith are NOT opposite ends of the spectrum! Doubt and faith are both gifts that can be held together in beautiful tension with one another. But, as we do so, let us join Thomas in looking for the marks of oppression, in order that we might stand against such in the name of our resurrected Christ!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.