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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/15/2007. The Second Sunday of Easter  
John 20:19-31

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>24</sup>Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:24-25)

One of the commentaries I read on this passage observed that when all is well and the sun is shining, then faith is easy, but that doubts and something of the temperament of Thomas can creep in when the day becomes a bit cloudy or "damp." Well, I guess this is such a day – a damp day – with the nor'easter building outside and perhaps us a little down-hearted inside.

But, here we are safe and sound in this strong, old church. It is a church that is strong not only because of its foundation on solid rock and immense sturdy oak beams, but even more because this same Jesus who suddenly appeared in the midst of his disciples, passed locked doors, also chooses to be present in our midst, here at Eighty-eighth Street and Lexington Avenue, as he is willing to be present everywhere where people are gathered in his name.

As I take this sacred desk I am very mindful of the young people we have with us today – not just our own dear young people, but also the visiting choir from Duluth East High School, Duluth, Minnesota. You are young with miles ahead of you and adventures galore. I am older and have seen something of

life, and I want to urge you to *not* be like Thomas! Do not be doubting people. It will only make life poorer for you.

Now, good things can be said about Thomas. I have tried to preach such sermons myself in the past. Especially I invite your attention to the words of Thomas back when Jesus was determined to return to Judea where only recently his opponents had tried to stone him. Thomas rallied the disciples to go with Jesus:

Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him. (John 11:16, KJV)

There *is* a tone of loyalty and courage in this saying of Thomas, albeit, mixed with pessimism. Still, Thomas deserves some credit for his bravery here. Also, I might point out that by legend, St. Thomas goes ahead to become a great missionary to the land of India, where he is honored to this day. And finally, I mention that some of my favorite people are named Thomas, including our congregational president. So, this is not a sermon against Thomas in general, just a sermon against Thomas on this particular occasion – that time when he doubted the resurrection of our Lord.

When you get to college, you might find a person or two who, with little self-doubt about their convictions, will urge *you* to doubt the faith of the Church. Thereby they will urge you to join Thomas at what I take to be his lowest ebb. My theme is that Thomas is not to be admired when he doubts the news of the resurrection of Jesus. Not to be admired at all.

There are three problems with Thomas when he doubts: His doubts are self-centered, they are sad, and they are futile, which happens to be to his benefit. So there you have the structure of my sermon: Doubts about the resurrection of Jesus are self-centered, sad, and ultimately futile.

First of all, I point to the self-centeredness of Thomas, as if he is the measure of the world. Thomas rejects the news of the resurrection:

Except *I* shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, *I* will not believe. (John 20:25, KJV, my emphasis)

When Thomas does this, he places himself in a privileged position, above the rest of us. Up to that point, Thomas stood where you and I also stand: dependent upon the apostolic witness for our belief in the best news this world has ever known. He had heard the news of Easter. And he had heard the news, not from some ragtag preacher like me, but from the apostolic college itself. Yet, he rejects that witness and lays down *his* terms of rationality and evidence.

Glad to say, Jesus is much more merciful on Thomas than I am inclined to be. Indeed, Jesus accommodates himself to Thomas's demand. I guess we should have expected no less of our Lord because, after all, he is the Good Shepherd who is willing to leave the ninety-nine sheep and go out in search of that one lost sheep. Thomas, with his refusal to believe his fellow disciples, is such a lost sheep, but Jesus comes to his rescue. Still, I think that Thomas is not to be admired or imitated at this point.

Again, when the disciples first told him the good news that Jesus is risen, Thomas stood at the point where you and I now stand. He seemed to think that he had enough

substance, wisdom, and judgment about him that he could withstand the witness of the apostles.

And, of course, he can! So can you and I. We might know that multitudes of people have believed in Jesus, among them some very good people, and yet we have the right and the freedom to disagree. We might know that our parents are Christians, that mother or father has lived for Christ and not regretted it, that from mother's knee she has tried to pass on the faith to us, that with tears and prayers our parents or grandparents have longed for the image of Christ to rise up in us, that there was great joy in the heart of the whole congregation at our baptism or our confirmation, that the church needs us... we might know *all* of these things, yet we have the right and freedom to disagree. And yet, I want to suggest to you a point about rationality: It is not unreasonable, it is not madness, to say to ourselves and to others: "I believe because many others believe, including the saints and martyrs, even some of my own folk. And if they are wrong, then this is the group I am willing to go down with." I do not think that is madness. I do not think it would have been insane for Thomas to accepted the word of his friends, the apostles.

My second worry about Doubting Thomas is that his doubts are sad and leave us rather fearful for him. It is the same with you: If you doubt that Jesus is risen, that is sad and tends to break our hearts.

Think of Thomas's melancholy week -- I mean that week between his rejection of the apostolic witness and the appearance of Jesus to him. The other disciples are happy. Jesus lives again, and this changes and brightens everything. But Thomas still droops along believing that Jesus is as dead as a doornail, and that it is the nature of reality that sweet Jesus, and everything he believes in, is destroyed and set aside. The other disciples have reason to pick up the way of life taught

by Jesus. Those sermons of his that had so thrilled their souls – those sermons about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, the life of charity on earth and the hope of treasure in heaven, of turning the other cheek, of loving the enemy and praying for those who persecute you – all of those moving sermons are now worth living by, because their Preacher lives! Triumphant over death and every obstacle. Why would they not be rejoice?

But Thomas cannot join them, for he stands on his own terms and disagrees. Thereby he deprives himself of a good world, and we are left wondering what is going to happen to the man who believes that Jesus and his ways can be disbelieved.

You are young, heading off into life. What is going to happen to you if you doubt Jesus and the testimony of his holy church? Well, we hope and pray that you flourish in every way. I just want to point out that it is a different thing to set out on life doubting Jesus rather than believing in him.

My last point about Thomas and his doubts is that his doubts are futile. In the end, they do not matter – in the end, though they certainly matter in the meanwhile.

There is a beautiful objectivity about the Christian faith. In their witness to Thomas, the apostolic band was offering a tremendous empirical claim about reality. They were sharing their conviction with Thomas that Jesus is risen. Now, Thomas might believe this or he might doubt it, but neither his belief nor his doubts can affect the matter one way or the other. If Jesus is risen, then he is risen, whether or not Thomas believes it or doubts it. And if Jesus is risen, then what Jesus believes in is going to win out, for nothing anymore can stop his good will from prevailing – not even miserable death, that great destroyer of all our hopes and dreams.

The good news for Thomas is that the sheer objectivity of the apostolic claim means,

if it is true, that one way or another, Thomas is going to end up in the hands of Jesus. And the Church is persuaded that that will be a great blessing for Thomas and for each of us.

And so, it is inevitable that the doubts of Thomas are met by the grace of the resurrected Lord. Jesus does indeed appear to Thomas. He shows Thomas the scars he bears. In those scars are the signs that Jesus knows how rough this world can be on a man, a woman, a boy, or a girl, who lives a life of love so thoroughly as Jesus does.

Thomas doubts, but one day Jesus appears to him nonetheless and shows him the marks of divine love for him – shows him the evidence that Jesus is willing to suffer and die, to give his body and his blood, for this world.

So, the doubts of Thomas are ultimately futile. It is just the intervening years that we worry about. Thomas needed to wait only a week – that melancholy week – to see the risen Jesus. For us, if we doubt Jesus, years might slip by until we meet him, and I cannot help worrying about those bygone years and grieving at the lost chances to live for Jesus during that time.

For believing in Jesus and living for him is a trustworthy way of serving and blessing our world. There might be other ways, and I suppose there are, yet this is the way of the apostles, the saints, the martyrs, the whole communion of saints including many of our own kin, and it is the way open to Thomas, to you, and to me.

Christ is risen and is worthy of our lives. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.