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Let me say first I count it an immense privilege to occupy this historic pulpit – where so many distinguished pastors have stood before me.

I recall most immediately Pr. Schulze and my late friend, Pr. Neuhaus (before he became Fr. Neuhaus). To stand here in their place is an unquestioned honor.

Let me say second, to deliver a sermon in the presence of Pr. Greg Fryer only adds to my feeling. It also tends to make me a little nervous. Your pastor has a reputation that extends beyond these walls, and it is a good reputation. He is known—even unto Missouri—as a pastor of courage and theological integrity.

It is a pleasure, genuine and unfeigned, to be here with you.

But I begin to suspect I should have chosen another Sunday. Here I am with St. Thomas, famously known as skeptic and doubter. So let us begin with prayer:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of each heart, be acceptable in the sight of God, our strength and our redemption. Amen

St. Thomas is a problem, period. He is a problem liturgically and he is a problem biblically.

Liturgically, he shows up regularly every second Sunday of Easter, not like clockwork but exactly as clockwork. Every second Sunday of Easter, pastors and priests using the common lectionary confront poor, poor St. Thomas and his doubt. How many times can you preach on St. Thomas and say anything new?

I have preached on St. Thomas every second Sunday of Easter every year since 1980. Whether I have ever said anything new must await the final revelation come the consummation of time.

This liturgical problem manifests itself by our popular image of Thomas—poor Thomas—as a skeptic, a doubter, a smuck, truth to tell, who could not and would not believe the resurrection unless and until his conditions for belief were met.

“Unless I see in his hand 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.”

Pretty definite. Thomas—a modern skeptic if ever there was—sees what he believes, and believes only what he see. As the late astronomer Carl Sagan said: “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” Of course, Sagan was talking about UFOs and alien landings on the earth, but the point is clear.

Thomas fits, and we are reminded of it liturgically every second Sunday of Easter. But is that really Thomas, a skeptic?

We come to the second problem with poor Thomas. Thomas is a problem biblically. Understand—only Thomas, of all the disciples in all four of the Gospels—

only Thomas is singled out for his doubt. Jesus berates by name only Thomas, poor Thomas, for doubt.

But figure this out—By any fair measurement, they all doubted, all the way back to the very beginning when Jesus calls them to his work.

Nathaniel is told the messiah has come, and what's more, from Nazareth. His reply: "Can any good come from Nazareth?"

Jesus raised no complaint to him, offered no defense of his hometown. How come Nathaniel gets off, but not poor Thomas?

In fact, by my count, according to the Gospels, on sixty-eight occasions: The disciples are described as fearful or afraid, questioning or anxious, amazed or perplexed, and stupid. The actual phrase there is "without understanding," but I think we know what it means.

On more than one occasion, Jesus calls the whole lot of them—politely—oh, you of little faith. Very gently, like you'd expect from Jesus.

But on another occasion—exasperation growing—he loses all patience and drops the D-word on them: Dullards.

But it was Thomas who at a key juncture—Jesus' return to Judea where his life was in jeopardy, all the other disciples were hanging back, afraid—it was Thomas who himself arose and said to the others: Arise, let us go and die with our Lord.

I hesitate to put it this way, it's not my purpose to call Scripture into question, but Thomas has been the victim of bad press. They all doubted.

We come now to that room that first night, the first evening of the first day of the first week following resurrection. All the disciples are present, except Thomas. And very quietly, very suddenly, they are at once each aware of the Lord's presence. He gives to them his peace. He shows them his hands and his side. He gives them a mission — as the Father sent him, so now he sends his disciples. He breathes on them and grants to them his Holy Spirit. He gives to them the power to undo sin. Go. And they do not.

And Thomas, poor Thomas, is not there.

The other disciples, like eager puppies, tell Thomas what has happened in his absence, once he shows up. How Jesus appeared, imparted his peace, sent them out just as the Father sent Jesus, breathed on them and gave them the power by the Spirit to undo sin. Yes, yes, yes, they tell him all of it, that's what happened, yes, sir, every word.

And Thomas looks at them. And they look at Thomas. Thomas listened to the story, looking these guys over. Oh, Jesus came to you, did he? Said "peace be with you," did he, and gave you his Holy Spirit, he did? Told you to go and undo sin, did he? And every one of you was right here, in this room, when he said, "I'm sending you." Is that the way it was? Yes, yes, yes, so they said.

Well, boys (this is Thomas speaking): If you been sent How come you Ain't went?

This is this point upon which Thomas doubts.

Do you know I enjoy Bluegrass, especially a small band called Nickel Creek. I also enjoy a punk rock Irish band called Flogging Molly. Their music is distinctively emblematic of a youth culture growing up without God—the first true generation of Americas who are mostly unbaptized, never educated in the Christian faith, never

taught even so much as the basic basics of what you and I believe. These are the children our generation has raised. They drift in a spiritual void, only with questions and never with answers.

Flogging Molly has a song that brings tears to me every time I hear it, titled *If I Ever Leave this World Alive*. He has hope—but no blessed assurance—he may leave this life alive. And he fears it is just as likely “I may never leave this world alive.”

And Nickel Creek, a song titled, get this, *Doubting Thomas*.

What will be left when I've drawn my last breath?
Besides the folks I've met and the folks who know me,
Will I discover a soul-saving love,
Or just the dirt above and below me,
I'm a doubting thomas,
I have no promise,
I do not feel safe,
Oh me of little faith.

The implicit question of Thomas to the disciples is the same question this world asks of you. “If you have been sent, why do you tarry?”

If I cannot see in you — if I cannot see in this congregation, if I cannot see in our churches the marks of his wounds raised in resurrection, how may I ever come to faith?

Let me touch his wounds, let me touch his side, let me hear his word and feel his breath. Let it be by you that his life comes to my faith and fills my every need. Let it be as the words spoken to us each in baptism:

May your life so shine in this world that people everywhere give praise to the Father in heaven, because of you.