

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Easter 2B, April 7, 2024  
John 20:19-31  
Doubting Thomas

*At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:*

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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

This is a sermon about Doubting Thomas. I do not want to be too hard on the man. In a way, I admire him for his commonsense and for his independence of thought. He wants to see Jesus for himself. He wants to see Jesus with his own eyes and touch him with his own hands. The *report* that Jesus is alive is not good enough for him. Perhaps he fears that those other disciples are victims of mass delusion — that their grief at the death of Jesus has clouded their minds and caused them to confuse their wishes with reality. But Thomas means to go his own way. If everyone else jumps off a cliff, it does not mean that he must do so too. He is going to wait and see for himself. So I have some admiration for the man. Thomas is not Judas. Thomas has not betrayed his Lord. He has just declined to believe the good news about his Lord. He has not declined forever. He is simply determined to wait to believe until he can see with his own eyes. Thomas strikes me as being a plain man, wanting evidence. He does not seem so bad to me. There are plenty of other good people in our world who are like Thomas.

I once had a great conversation with someone at the Pastor's Booth. As is my way, I was bragging about Jesus, going on and on about how Jesus was a good man, and that he is risen from the dead, so that nothing can stop him now. What he believes in is going to prevail. Jesus is the one worth living for and his ways are the ones worth following. I was going on in this fashion, but the dear lady shrugged and said, "Well, if he is alive, where is he?" She looked to the left. She looked to the right. She did not see Jesus. I fear that what I was saying and what I was excited about did not make sense to her. And I thought to myself, "What a great person! She reminds of St. Thomas. I like her commonsense approach to things."

So, Thomas does not seem so bad to me. Neither do other folks who simply do not see Jesus and so find it hard to believe in him.

Still, there are problems connected with Thomas. For one thing, his disbelief might have been hard on the other disciples. Only recently, they had come to believe an incredible thought: that a dead man now lives — lives in such a way that death no longer holds sway over him. This was a new thought

on earth, perhaps hard to be entirely convinced of, and now Thomas comes along and essentially says that his brothers in the Lord are a bunch of idiots! That is, Thomas's disbelief threatens the new faith of the other disciples.

It is the same with us. I sometimes wonder whether proud atheists in our town understand the harm they might be doing to other, more simple souls. I mean, if a member of your family or a close friend despises your faith in Jesus and thinks it stupid, that is a burden to bear in life.

So, that is one complaint I have about Doubting Thomas. His doubts threaten to cause doubts in other people.

Secondly, I am not sure that it was right for Thomas to lay down the conditions of his belief. He insists upon seeing Jesus and touching Jesus with his own hands. At first, this might sound sensible. But the problem is that it leaves little room for the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. Some Christians of profound faith simply looked up one day and discovered that they believed in Jesus. They might have been coming to church for years without much real conviction. And yet, one day, they found themselves believing in Jesus and living for him, indeed, even being willing to suffer for him if need be. It might be hard to explain this coming to belief. It might simply be that in coming to church, they had placed themselves in a situation in which the Bible readings and the hymns of church worked their holy influence on them. That is, they had placed themselves within the vicinity of the Holy Spirit, and now, they find themselves to be believers in Jesus. But if they had laid down the condition that they would only believe if they could see and touch for themselves, then those conditions might have ended up excluding them from faith.

My third worry about Thomas is that his unbelief left him to wander about in a poorer world. If he had been present that first Sunday evening, along with the rest of the disciples, he could have gotten on in life with his Savior. But his stubborn refusal to believe until he could see and touch Jesus meant that he went through those seven days *differently* from the other disciples. They had Jesus. He did not. They had their Lord. He did not. They had confirmation that the convictions and ways of Jesus were true and worth following, but Thomas did not. Through his doubts, Thomas had launched himself into a poorer world. The other disciples had reason to be happy and energized. Thomas did not. All he could do was press on as an unbeliever.

This is our fundamental ground for evangelism. Love for our neighbors means that we want them to have some hope in this world and some sense of direction. We want them too to have the Good Shepherd. We do not want them to have to face lions and wolves, illness and aging and the troubles and confusion of life, without Jesus. We want to introduce them to the One we believe makes life more noble and more hopeful. We do not want them to have to wander in a tough world without Jesus, as Thomas wandered for those seven days.

My fourth trouble with Thomas is that he rejected what *we* have: the apostolic witness. You and I live by a report — a blessed rumor handed on generation by generation. We live by a report that has been immensely strengthened by the millions upon millions of believers through the centuries who have believed the blessed rumor and lived never to regret a thing. But the beginning of that blessed rumor was the disciples. They were the ones who met the resurrected Jesus and testified to his conquering of death. That is what we have. And that is what Thomas had, but it was insufficient for him. In that way, he rather put us down. For him, the apostolic witness was not enough. But that is what *we* have!

So, that is some of the ebb and flow of my thinking about Thomas. I admire him in some ways, and I worry about him in other ways.

But the good and hopeful thing about the story of Thomas is that he did indeed come to faith. His desire to see and touch the living Jesus was answered. Our desire will be answered too. Not only will we hear the Good Shepherd call our name, as he called Mary Magdalene by name, but also we will be able to see him and touch him and clap him on the back.

The words that encourage me along these lines are words that we can hear two times in our Gospel Lesson. They are words about the door. And so we hear the first verse of our reading:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19, RSV)

The mention of the doors is repeated when Thomas is gathered with the other disciples:

<sup>26</sup>Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:26, RSV)

In the history of preaching, the main emphasis of this passage is on the physical abilities of our risen Jesus. He has what is called a “glorified body.” It is a body like ours, so that he can be heard and seen and touched and he can enjoy food with his disciples, but also it is a body that has capacities that go beyond our normal ones. In this case, the closed doors are no obstacle to him. If he wants physically to be there, he simply goes there. If he wants to be with the disciples, it does not matter whether the doors are shut. And if he wants to be off and go walking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, off he goes. He is with them immediately. I believe that you and I are going to have

glorified bodies too, one day. And that will be great! For now, we might creak along, with arthritis and pain in our feet, but one day, we will have spring in our step again. As for me, I think I want to visit Mars. Just up and be there, and fully able to breathe and look around.

Anyway, that is the traditional thought about the closed doors. They are no obstacle to Jesus and his glorified body.

But I want to take those doors and enlarge on them, pushing them beyond their usual wood and nails and hinges. I want to think of them big time as *anything* that gets in the way of our faith in Jesus. I mean, when Thomas gave his great testimony to Jesus:

<sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28, RSV)

...when Thomas gave his testimony, he did not have to think it out. He did not have to contemplate the matter and conclude, Jesus is my God. Rather, the words came flying out of his lips. Any hesitancy he had had in the past is now gone. Now, faith in Jesus is easy. Now faith in Jesus is happily inescapable.

So it will be with any of us who might have our doubts about the resurrection of Jesus. Wait a while, and you will no longer have doubts. You will not be able to have doubts.

But the problem with waiting a while is that we then place ourselves alongside Thomas in those seven days between the first appearance of Jesus and the second appearance. The other ten disciples were happy when they saw the Lord. The other ten disciples were already at work re-conceiving the world in a hopeful way now that Jesus is risen from the dead. But Thomas misses out on the joy. He perseveres in doubt. He trudges along withholding himself from the Gospel until at last he sees Jesus face to face.

I think we can do better than that. In this world of ours, there are closed doors that would hinder our faith. There are obstacles to faith. Popular culture and university professors might disparage Christian faith. Family members and friends might have affection for us, but their affection bypasses our faith. It is as if they love us in *spite of* our faith in Jesus, not because of it. And we know that; we feel it about them. Classmates and work colleagues and neighbors might think that we are behind the times, out of step, old-fashioned. And who likes to be left behind? Who likes to be thought odd?

But if believing in Jesus renders us odd, let us be odd! One day, Jesus will pass through all the doors obscuring him or disrupting faith in him. In fact, one day, every knee shall bow before Jesus and acknowledge him as Lord, so that even folks who now are trying to hinder our faith will one day join us in bended knee before Jesus.

What we do not want is that we should be overcome by any resistance to Jesus we might find in our friends or colleagues, for that would help neither

us nor them. We are like Thomas. We have heard the apostolic witness. It is a witness that has been cherished and honored through the generations. We can cherish and honor it too, come what may. Someday, faith will be easy — even happily inescapable. For now, our faith is contested and we might be tempted by doubts, but let us fight for our faith. Let us live for Jesus, no matter what anyone else says. The line between living by a faith we are not entirely sure of and actually starting to have faith is a line that is too fine to sort out and is not worth sorting out. We can leave that to the Holy Spirit. As for us, we can set out each day to live for Jesus, regardless of any doubts that might come our way. Walking with Jesus is the best path to faith and helps us to be everything our Maker wants us to be, even our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.

*At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:*

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**