

Encounters with Jesus: Easter for Thomas, Too

John 20:19-31

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on April 23, 2017]

I

Has this ever happened to you?—

You walk into a room where three of your friends are engrossed in conversation, and as soon as they see you, they stop talking.

And you are left wondering:

“Are they talking about me?”

“Is there some deep, dark secret they don’t want me to know about?”

This can be very disconcerting.

Or maybe you’ve had the experience of being absent from work,
perhaps home sick or on vacation,
when some big event happened—
a co-worker got engaged
or announced she was pregnant
or someone was promoted or terminated—
and everyone knew about it...except you.

Do you remember how you felt when that happened?

Did you like feeling left out,
overlooked,
out of the loop?

We don’t like feeling that way, do we?

To be on the outside looking in is always unsettling.

II

If you can identify with any of those feelings, you know something of how Thomas must have felt on the evening of the first Easter.

All the other disciples were privy to the good news of Easter and had experienced it first-hand.

The risen Lord appeared in their midst,
showed them the wounds of Calvary's cross—
the nail prints in his hands...
the spear thrust in his side.

Then he breathed the gift of the Holy Spirit on them—
just as God in creation breathed the breathe of life into the first human.

Now Jesus initiates a new creation, as he commissions the disciples to offer to others the same blessings of forgiveness, grace, and peace that he brought to them.

Thomas missed all of this.

For reasons that are not explained, he was absent when Jesus appeared.

Why was Thomas not there?

Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner thinks Thomas just wanted some fresh air, wanted to get away from the heavy oppression of that locked room.

So he's out having a cup of coffee or sitting on a park bench watching the pigeons.

Retired Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan speculated that Thomas went grocery shopping.

Ever the practical one, he was concerned about his friends so he went to buy food to sustain them in their time of stress.

Whatever the reason for Thomas' absence, we should note that he was the only disciple who had the courage to leave that locked room.

Thomas was no different from you or me,
 in that he expresses the frustration of the person who was out of the loop.

The other disciples had experienced something he had not.

"We have seen the Lord," they tell him and Thomas finds that absolutely
 incredulous.

He is emphatic in his resistance to their testimony:

*"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."*

It's bad enough to be out of the loop,
 but it's even worse when—
 having been given the inside scoop—
 you find it impossible to believe!

I suspect that there are some Thomases here today.

Or, to put it another way, I suspect there is a little of Thomas inside each of us.

Thomas' name in Greek means "the twin," and I don't think that is an accident.

Thomas' twin is you and me and every other person who has ever struggled to find
 certainty in the midst of doubt...
 hope in the midst of despair...
 faith in the midst of the struggles of the heart and of the mind.

III

So today I have good news for you: Easter is for Thomas, too.

Gerrit Scott Dawson called Thomas "a forerunner for all of us who were not there."

So if you came here today with a certain reserve or skepticism—
 wanting to celebrate the message of Easter,
 but not sure if you should,
 not sure if you can totally believe it—

you have a very good friend in Thomas.

Thomas is your companion in skepticism.

We should not be too hard on Thomas about his low threshold of disbelief,
for we are often just like him.

Think of how frequently we say,
in response to something we are told or hear about,
"I can't believe it."

News that comes to us can either be so good,
or so bad,
that for a time our powers of credulity are strained.

Time is needed to process and to integrate.

The third stanza of "How Great Thou Art" celebrates the saving work of Jesus Christ but hints at the presence of doubt:

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in...*

Events can be so powerfully moving and unsettling,
that for a time we are in disbelief...
we "scarce can take it in."

But I suggest to you today that doubt is faith's employee, not faith's nemesis.

The author of the Book of Hebrews writes,

*"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen."*

Faith is not void of doubt, but requires a daily commitment to developing our spiritual walk despite life's uncertainties and sometimes cruelties.

Faith doesn't take away our doubts,
but is strengthened by them.

And faith doesn't deliver us from our problems and heartaches,
but gives us the strength to persevere through them
and help others as they navigate through the abyss of nothingness.

What's more, just because we are historically removed from an event does not mean we cannot believe in it.

Most of us don't remember the moment of birth,
but the very fact that we are here is living proof that birth occurred.

There are many things we believe that are historically distant from us.

And yet we know they are true because we have the testimony of those who witnessed what happened firsthand and their experience is undeniable.

In not many years, there will be no one living who survived the Nazi concentration camps of Dachau and Auschwitz.

While regrettably there are people around who claim to be Holocaust deniers, there are legions of people whose recorded testimonies will be the truth on this matter forever.

There are still people living who can show us photographs they took of liberated concentration camp survivors at the end of World War II.

We can hold those photographs in our hands and be transported back to a heinous reality that took place almost three quarters of a century ago.

We believe that such camps existed because there is evidence they did.

So too we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ because we see the evidence that it is so!

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," says Jesus.

And Thomas says, "Amen!"

IV

Strange as it may seem, we have no problem seeing the evidence of destruction.

A spring tornado rips through a community and completely destroys homes and buildings.

The evening news carries graphic video;
the morning paper has gruesome pictures.

By the same token, the signs of resurrection are slower to be seen.

It takes months, and sometimes years, to see the work of resurrection become increasingly visible.

So much of the time, the signs of resurrection are so slight as to be imperceptible.

But God's resurrecting activity is ongoing.

Its timetable may vary,
but God's intent does not.

While people naturally experience God in a wide variety of ways, there is an Old Testament tradition that it is life-threatening to behold God face-to-face.

You may recall the Genesis 32 story of Jacob's nocturnal wrestling match with an unknown assailant.

Jacob, all alone and awaiting certain doom the next day,
finds himself wrestling all night long with a mysterious stranger.

The struggle continues, but the dawn is coming and the man with whom Jacob is wrestling later becomes identified as God.

As dawn approaches, Jacob's adversary says: "Let me go, for the day is breaking" (Genesis 32:26).

For Jacob, that kind of daytime seeing would have been more than he could bear.

In the aftermath of the struggle, Jacob says:
"For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (v. 30).

How could we stand face to face with God at high noon and survive the intensity of the moment?

Would not God's light blind us,
 God's intensity consume us,
 God's holiness shrink us?

That doesn't mean we can't hear and see God,
 but it does mean that God's presence is always a mediated one.

It comes to us "in" and "through."

Through the bread and the cup...
in Christ...
through this set of circumstances...
in this musical composition,
 or *in* that verse or poem...
in this dream or *through* that intuition.

V

This is how Easter came for Thomas and how it often comes for you and me—
in and *through* the crucible of doubt.

One of the greatest blessings we encounter as Christians is the freedom to admit
 when we have doubts.

As faithful Christians, we should have the audacity to ask tough questions
 concerning our faith and our traditions.

For some, doubt is synonymous with a lack of faith,
 but faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin.

They are the Yin and Yang, if you would, of the Christian life.

According to Paul Tillich, doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.

Rather than suppress our doubts, we should explore them and allow them to set us
 on a journey of discovery and a deepening of our beliefs and convictions.

Francis Bacon wrote:

If a man will begin in certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.

In our Gospel reading, Thomas asked for proof, and we also want proof that our faith is not in vain.

Thomas often gets a bad rap for doubting the resurrection of Jesus.

However, he was no more doubtful than the other disciples.

The other disciples didn't believe that Jesus had risen until he appeared to them.

So why should we expect Thomas to be any different?

In fact, we applaud Thomas for his insistence on wanting tangible proof.

After all, Thomas was well aware that Jesus wasn't the first messianic figure on the scene to be crucified by the Roman occupiers.

Thomas showed great religious restraint and demonstrated the proper amount of rational doubt.

But when Jesus appeared to him a week later and showed him the hallowed wounds of Calvary's cross,

Thomas proclaimed without hesitation or reservation,
"My Lord, and my God."

Sometimes we look to spiritual giants,
 the superstars of Christianity,
 and feel inferior in our own personal walk in comparison.

However, the greatest in the Kingdom sometimes deal with the greatest doubt.

The diary of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (now St. Teresa) reveals a saintly person who struggled with a type of doubt that would crush the faint of heart.

She wrote to her spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael Van Der Peet, in 1979,

"Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."

For the last nearly half-century of her life Mother Teresa felt no presence of God whatsoever — neither in her heart or in the Eucharist.

That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta and— except for a five-week break in 1959 — never abated.

Although perpetually cheery in public, Mother Teresa lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain.

She bemoaned the “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness” and “torture” she was undergoing.

She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God.

Nevertheless, she continued to love the least in God’s creation and dedicate her life to Christ to the very end.

Mother Teresa isn’t alone in her struggle with doubt.

Jewish-American author Isaac Bashevis Singer stated that doubt is part of all religions, that all the religious thinkers were doubters.

The art critic Robert Hughes said,

“The greater the artist, the greater the doubt. Perfect confidence is granted to the less talented as a consolation prize.”

A quote you’ve heard me give before is from Frederick Buechner:

Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.

Catholic priest Henri Nouwen wrote,

“So I am praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting.”

Despite Fr. Nouwen’s own struggles with doubt, he was able to mentor and encourage countless thousands through his writings, lectures, and sermons.

One particular quote from a book of his has been a lifeboat for many who find themselves overcome with the waves of life’s stormy doubts:

“Have the courage to trust that you will not fall into an abyss of nothingness, but into the embrace of a God whose love can heal all your wounds.”

VI

My friends, *in* and *through* Christ’s resurrection we find the embrace of a God whose love can heal all our wounds.

But let there be no equivocating about who it is that is doing the resurrecting.

Show me a repaired relationship,
and I’ll show you resurrection.

Show me a person with an attitude baptized in the font of humility,
and I’ll show you resurrection.

Show me the person who struggled to throw off the chains of alcohol or drug addiction and found the pathway to sobriety,
and I’ll show you resurrection.

Show me a community where people from distinctively different camps have found a common ground of promise,
and I’ll show you resurrection.

Show me a self-righteous person who suddenly discovers her own shadow and develops sensitivity and compassion as a result,
and I’ll show you resurrection.

Show me someone who has wrestled with the black dog of depression and has lived to tell about it,

and I'll show you resurrection.

Every congregation is full of resurrection stories...
if we will but take time to notice.

And just because your story seems to be a modest one,
don't be fooled:

Modest stories are mighty in their own right.

No...you and I weren't there for the first Easter—
only a handful were.

But like Thomas, we didn't have to be.

Easter is for Thomas and for the Thomas who lives in you and me, too.

We have had,
and will continue to have,
moments when the presence of the risen Christ is made known to us.

And like Thomas, we will be able to confess: *"My Lord and my God!"*

And the beatitude that Jesus gave to Thomas will be given to us as well.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Blessed indeed!

Amen.

Sources:

John Buchanan, "Doubt," sermon preached March 30, 2008, Chicago, Illinois, retrieved from
<http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2008/033008.html>.

Robert Noblett, "Easter for Thomas, Too," retrieved from <https://www.sermons.com/sermon/easter-for-thomas-too/1349338>.

Timothy G. Warren, "Doubt Strengthens Faith," retrieved from
<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2017/03/16/doubt-strengthens-faith-easter-2a-april-23-2017/>.

Commentaries on John: New Interpreter's Bible, Wright, Interpretation.