

April 19, 2009  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Thomas Had Doubts

John 20:24-29; 1 John 1:1-4

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Rev. Earl F. Palmer

**W**e've been in the middle of a series of sermons this whole time of Lent that we've entitled "Meet Jesus of Nazareth" and we have been watching encounters that the gospel records tell us of people who met Jesus of Nazareth. Last week was the greatest of all the encounters. When they weren't even looking for him, when they had already thought that everything was over, the women go to the tomb wondering how they can prepare a proper burial for the Jesus who was slain. And by surprise, when they're not expecting it, they make the discovery that Jesus Christ is alive. When Mary Magdalene comes to Peter and John and the other disciples, she says, "I've seen the Lord." At first they do not believe her or that her report was possible and then that night, the disciples see the Lord. He comes and finds them. Again, they're not looking for Him. They're hiding, and he finds them.

Next week is the final sermon in this series, our final worship time in this series, and our high school youth are going to share how they have met Jesus of Nazareth. We have a chance to hear their witness on Youth Sunday as they share their own meetings with Jesus of Nazareth. But today, we have one more person to look at.

Our Lord affirms his victory to the disciples, but one of the disciples was

not there, and John gives us that account as well. Let's listen to the text from the 20th chapter of John. "But Thomas, who was called the twin, one of the 12, was not with them when Jesus came." We don't know why. Maybe the death of our Lord is just too big of a blow for him. But for whatever reason, he is not with the disciples on the first day of the week when Jesus appeared. "So Thomas, who was called the Twin, one of the 12, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.'" They share this good news that first the women had shared with them and now they share with Thomas. 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." And for this sentence, we call this man, "Doubting Thomas." He had doubts. These are intellectual doubts. He is doubting the witness of the disciples. It's not so much that he's doubting Jesus himself. In fact, he makes it clear, "If I can put my finger in the nail marks, I know that Jesus of Nazareth died. I know the spear went into His side. I know of His death. I went with Jesus along with the disciples for the three years of our Lord's ministry and that man died and I know it. Now, you tell me about a victory." But it's the victory that the disciples are telling him about that he doubts. He's doubting their witness to the victory. They said, "We've seen the Lord," and it is that witness that he is doubting. That is a very genuine, intellectual doubt. And he's saying in fact, "If the Jesus of Nazareth that I know, if He is alive, I'll believe. I just can't trust your witness. It's your witness, the witness of the church, the witness of these friends that I'm calling into question. Unless I can see the nail scars in His hands and put my finger in those marks and my hand in His side, I am unable to believe."

Let me put his doubt in philosophical terms. Thomas is insisting that the Jesus of History, the Jesus of Nazareth that we've been looking at in these encounters, the Jesus of History that he knew, he insists that this Jesus must be the Christ of Faith that his friends now are proclaiming with their Easter faith and their Easter hope, they're sharing the Christ of Faith victory. Thomas is saying that the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith must be the same person. That's his doubt. That's his question. He knows about the death of Jesus, that's the reference to the nail scars. He knows that that event happened. And now he needs to know that the victory of Jesus is also an event that happened, not just an idea. In a sense, he's saying, "I cannot take

a chance on the fact that perhaps you've seen a ghost." And people believed in ghosts. "I cannot take a chance that you've had a spiritual discovery or a spiritual assurance and, of course, I don't want to take a chance on the fact that you've seen a hallucination. Sometimes people in profound grief will have hallucination experiences. I can't take a chance on that. Or even an angel--and I know that the women that went to the tomb saw an angel who said, "Why are you looking for Jesus among the dead? He's not among the dead. He has risen." And that's a witness from a messenger, may be even a messenger from God. "I can't even take a chance on that. I need to know that the man who died, if that man is alive, I'll believe." I call those substantial doubts. They're historical and intellectual doubts. Now, I want to ask you this question; how can they be resolved? How can doubts like these be resolved? Maybe some in this room today, maybe you have battled those doubts yourself or are right now, facing doubt. How can that kind of doubt be resolved? Is it possible for intellectual questions or truth to be resolved?

I want to invite you to take a journey with Thomas. It seems to me there are four things that happened, four ingredients that we can trace that are going to happen right in front of our eyes and as a result of those, one of the greatest confessions of faith made in all of the New Testament is going to be made not by Peter and not by John, but by Thomas.

The first step in his journey is that Thomas puts into words, as well as he can, what he needs to know. I've been a pastor long enough that I've talked to many students and older people, too, who are struggling with doubts. I learned from this, to do the same thing with anyone in the midst of doubts, also with myself, and that is I always ask people who are struggling with doubt, who are struggling with the truth question, I always ask them to do this; "Tell me what you need to know." What do you need to know? Even if it's a preliminary statement and you don't know all that you may need to know, think about it right now: what do you need to know? Thomas puts it bluntly and concretely. "I cannot believe unless I can put my finger in the nail scars of his hands, which is the mark that Christ's suffering, which I am sure of as an event that I know happened. He tells what he needs to know. He tells it to the disciples. He shares with them what he needs to know. I think that's the first step toward any kind of intellectual resolution in a person's life. You need to express. Verbally or you may write down what you



need to know.

Secondly, the text goes on. “Eight days later,” verse 26, “the disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Eight days later, the disciples were in the house,” the place where they’ve been where Christ had come and found them, “and Thomas was with them.” That’s the second ingredient in Thomas’ journey. Eight days later and he has stayed even with his doubts, with the people who have faith. Thomas does not have faith now. Thomas is in the midst of doubt, yet he stays with the people who have faith. He stays honestly, he doesn’t fake it. He doesn’t try to please them to say what he thinks they would like to hear. He stays with them honestly, but he stays.

I always say to people, “If you’re in doubt, stay with the people who have faith.” If you’re a teacher and you suddenly have doubts, perhaps you should stop teaching for a while but stay. Don’t teach your doubts. Work with your doubts. Write down your doubts. But stay with the people who have faith. He stays with them, and he stays honestly. He might be a wet blanket for the group but he stays. They’re all saying, “Let’s just have another chorus singing about how Christ lives, “He lives. You ask me how I know he lives...” and Thomas is there saying, “Well, I hope so. I hope so. I wish it were true.” But he stays; he stays with the people who have decided to trust Jesus. I always say to people, “Stay with the people who have faith especially the people you know and who you trust otherwise.” And so put up with them if they had already proven their integrity to you. I don’t think it’s the time now to switch churches and keep trying to find another fellowship where you maybe find people who will agree with your doubt. Stay with the people who believe. That’s the second ingredient.

The third ingredient is the same sentence, “Eight days later, the disciples were in the upper room, and Thomas was with them.” If Thomas stays with the disciples, then the disciples stay with Thomas, maybe that’s even harder. They stay with him and you know that may not be easy to do. They would like to become really a working unit and now they’ve got a doubter here in the midst of them, yet they stay with him. They stay with him. We have no record of the other ten disciples putting pressure on him. “Now, Thomas, if you’re going to be in our group, we want everybody to be together and in total unity. Okay, now, say you believe. That’ll help us a lot.” They don’t do that to him.

As an interesting contrast, if you read Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*<sup>1</sup> which is a study really of the Communist movement in Russia during that severe Soviet period, the one thing that Pasternak points out is that the Communist movement would allow no revisionists in the units of the party; if anybody became in any way slightly a doubter (and that's what happens to Yuri Andreivich, he becomes a doubter so they have to evict him from the cell.) You can't have anybody who is a 'revisionist.' That's the phrase Lenin used. A person who's in doubt should be out of the worker cell group. We only want pure believers in the circle.

It's interesting that the Christian church has been able to stand with people who are in doubt, who are in the journey of faith and doubt, and yet has been able to stay with them especially when the Christian church is mature. And I think it's one of the marks of the authenticity of the assurance that these early disciples had that eight days later, they're able to put up with Thomas even though Thomas is perhaps a challenge for them, because they're trying to share their faith with one another and he's standing there saying, "I hope it's true." Yet, they're so certain of the reality of their discovery that they're able to withstand the doubter. And I think that's one of the marks in a family and in church, when you can hold on to the people who struggle with doubt, hold on to the people that are troubled at a certain point in their journey because the assurance is so real that they and their journey doesn't threaten your assurance. If your assurance is threatened by a doubter, then how sure are you?

And so, eight days later, the disciples are in their room, Thomas was with them. I think that's very important. So, there are three markers. Well, the fourth has to do with Jesus Christ himself and how he does assure Thomas. Listen to the text. "Eight days later, the disciples were in the house, Thomas was with them. The doors were shut. Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" The same sentence he had said when he met the disciples on the first day of the week that night. And then he addresses Thomas personally, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side, do not doubt but believe." We have no record that Thomas actually does this but our Lord offered it to him. We have no record of Thomas actually putting his hand in the mark or his hand in the side, but something happened when Jesus stood there that assured him and Thomas then affirms a great statement of faith, Thomas answered, "My Lord, my God." And then Jesus gives a blessing. "Have you believed because

you have seen? Blessed are those who do not see or will not see yet will believe.”

This resolution is profound because Jesus Christ resolves Thomas but in a way that made sense to Thomas. It may not have met all the specific requirements that Thomas thought he needed to have but it was enough. And I think that's the way faith is. You need enough evidence that you're willing to trust in the faithfulness of God; and Thomas has enough evidence and he makes his great statement of faith. Then follows a simple sentence from Jesus, some have interpreted this next sentence as a rebuke: “Thomas, you see now and you believe. Blessed are those who don't see but will believe.” I don't agree with that because it's in simple indicative language. You know what I think our Lord is saying is, “Thomas, you've seen and now you believe. Blessed are those who do not see or will not see but will believe.” In other words, our Lord is saying, “Thomas, your assurance is going to be a blessing to those who don't see and will not see in the same way you have.” How is that true? Let me tell you why. This event is in our gain because we now know, we who live in the 21st century, we know right now in our century that at least one member of the early disciples band, one member of that band insisted that the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith were the same person. We now know that great fact because of Thomas. We know that maybe others at least were caught up by emotion or caught up by some sort of spiritual assurance but we know that at least one man, and one in the Apostolic band, insisted that the Jesus of History, the man who actually died is the man who actually won. So we have this one man, who insisted that the concreteness of Christ's death was matched by the concreteness of Christ's victory. So that victory was not just in word, it was not just in theory but it was an event. And that is a great gain for us. We now can trust the promises that Christ made because they were concrete. His death was a concrete reality at the cross and now his victory is concrete.

Last week on Easter I said, “You know, when our Lord died in the cross he made promises, two promises,” and I ended last Sunday by asking, “What do we do with the promises that Christ made.” He promised--the very first word from the cross is, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” Can Jesus Christ fulfill that promise, his offer of forgiveness? Will his father honor that? We know because of the victory of Christ, now, that we can build on that promise. And to a thief he said, “I say to you, today you shall



be with me in paradise.” That promise made to a thief who was also dying. What do we do with the promise? Is it a sentiment or is it a promise that we can count on? And we realized last week, that the huge victory for us of Easter is that we can count on the promises that Christ made. That’s the result we have.

Karl Barth, has this to say in his *Commentary on the Apostle’s Creed*<sup>2</sup> which we just recited that says, “And I believe that on the third day, Christ rose again from the dead.” Listen to Barth, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals, it completes the proclamation of victory. We must not transmute the resurrection into a spiritual event. We must listen to it and let it tell us the story how there was an empty grave and new life beyond death became visible, concrete, and real.” The victory of Christ is real. His death was real. His love is an event, it’s not an idea. And now, with the help of Thomas, we know that his victory at Easter is an event, not just an idea.

Think of how actual Easter is, and how concrete and how personal Easter is. Isn’t it interesting that the word of assurance to Mary Magdalene at the tomb when she was looking for her slain friend and she sees Jesus and thinks she sees the gardener and says, “If you’ve taken him away, show me where they have taken him so that we can take care of his body for a proper burial,” and the assurance that Mary hears is one word, it’s the word that she knows best: Jesus says to her, “Mary,” her name? In her concreteness, when she hears that, she realizes it is the Lord and then she is able to say to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” And Thomas has his name spoken, too, in the midst of his doubt. “Thomas, put your hand in my side. Don’t be unbelieving, believe.”

In a minute, we will hear a song sung for us by the choir and then we will sing the last stanza. The song is “In Christ Alone.” Let me read a couple of lines that we will then hear and sing. The third stanza of this great song is “There in the ground, His body lay. The light of the world, by darkness slain. Then bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave, He rose again. And as He stands in victory, sins’ curse has lost its grip on me. For I am His and He is mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ.” What a line! Because of his victory, sins’ curse loses its grip on me. It means that we can claim the promises. The promises are concrete. His love is concrete and we can claim that victory. And then at the end as a congregation we will sing, “No guilt in life, no fear in death. This is the power of Christ in me. From

life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand. Til' He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ, I'll stand." Do you believe that? One man in the Apostolic band insisted that the Jesus of History who paid that price is the one who won the victory and that's a gain for us.

Heavenly Father, thank you that in Christ alone who won this victory, we have a victory won for us and we are invited by Jesus Christ to claim it. Thank you for that. Thank you for Thomas. Thank you for honest people who have doubts. And then, thank you that you're able to resolve our doubts so that we can know your love is real. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

1 Pasternak, Boris. *Dr. Zhivago*. 1957, Feltrinelli (first edition), Pantheon Books: Italy.

2 Barth, Karl. *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed According to Calvin's Catechism*. Jean-Louis Leuba (editor). Gabriel Vahanian (translator). 2006, Wipf & Stock Publishers.

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*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20016  
www.NationalPres.org 202/537-0800