

## **“Seeing Isn’t Always Believing”**

© 2008 Rev. James L. Perry, Jr.  
East Cobb United Methodist Church  
March 30, 2008

Scripture: John 20:19-31  
Prayer

### **Thomas Speaks**

(Joe Harden portrays the Apostle Thomas.)

“I expected him to scold me, not – as you might think – for doubting. We had all doubted, at different times, and he was never angry. Indeed, he doubted himself sometimes, or if he didn’t, he certainly understood how it felt, because he would sing the Psalms of doubt with great fervor. Doubt wasn’t an enemy to him. He could stand us doubting. It was indifference he couldn’t stand: Indifference and apathy.”

”I expected him to scold me, perhaps for making conditions. I did do that, and I won’t deny it. ‘If only I see this and do that...then I’ll believe.’ What a fool, I expected him to scold me because I wasn’t there when he came. The others were present, I was absent. It wasn’t their fault or his fault. It was mine. I had – for whatever reason – decided that it was all finished. He came back to say that it was all beginning.”

“I expected him to scold me. But he didn’t. He gave me his hand and, more than that, he gave me his peace.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you know how Thomas felt? Have you ever had doubts that others did not share? Doubts that perhaps you were afraid to share? We say things like, “Show me!” or “Seeing is believing.” But is it?

### **Our Cultural Filters**

Roughly three hundred years ago, Western civilization emerged into what frequently is called the Age of Reason. We are still in it. What this means is that educated people of this civilization and age have come to believe that there is, if you dig deeply enough, a rational explanation for all that happens. We emerged from the Age of Faith into this Age of Reason. The Age of Faith was marked by faith in many things that were perhaps both unproven and unprovable, some more essential than others.<sup>2</sup> But in an age when science and faith seem to be in tension with one another, we need to take a new look at what is real and what makes something real to us. When we can’t figure it out, we make a wide circle around it or look at it as some sort of fringe theory or hoax.

There are some things we take for granted to be true that cannot be explained rationally. Birds can’t fly backwards, one might think, but if you think that, you

have never watched a hummingbird closely. Bumblebees aerodynamically should not be able to fly at all. But is there anyone here that does not believe they can? Seeing isn't always believing!

We do not like to talk about the doubts that we harbor in our hearts, and it seems especially out of place on this first Sunday after Easter, only seven short days after we have celebrated with joy the Resurrection of Christ. And yet, how can we deal with the doubt of this age, with the doubt in our families, with the doubt in our own hearts, if we choose to ignore it, if we choose to act like it doesn't exist or like we shouldn't care about it? Yes, we have celebrated Easter, but on Monday we returned to the realities of life, working, helping with homework, tending to the yard, filling out tax forms, etc.

### **That Doesn't Make Sense!**

The Apostle John records three resurrection appearances by Jesus in this chapter: (1) to Mary Magdalene (John 20:16) on that first Easter morning, (2) to ten of the disciples (John 20:19) on that first Easter evening, and (3) to the disciples and Thomas (John 20:27) a week later. Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared to the ten on that Resurrection Evening. We don't know why Thomas was missing. Perhaps the overwhelming sense of failure that the death of Jesus on a cross brought to him was such that he needed time and space on his own, away from his friends, just to come to terms with it all. Different people react to life experiences in different ways. Maybe Thomas wasn't being disloyal so much as he was dealing with grief in his own way.

But Thomas was there a week later and heard the testimony of the other disciples that Jesus was alive! Thomas was processing a lot of verbal input from his friends, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John; Philip, Bartholomew; Matthew; James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus; and Simon the Zealot. And what he was hearing did not square with what he had seen and heard on that Friday – the day of the crucifixion. You have seen the Lord, huh? Sure you have, and we're all invited to Herod's palace for dinner! It was unbelievable. If you had seen your friend die and seen or been told he was buried, you would not expect to see him again living, breathing, talking just a couple of days later.

Sometimes I think Thomas gets a bum rap. Everyone calls him "doubting Thomas." But he only doubted for a week. He had a full life and was very faithful. Yet he gets ridiculed for his behavior during one week. So why does Thomas get the title "doubting" and not the others? Partly because he was not in the right place at the right time - he missed the first appearance. But mainly because he had the courage to say out loud what his doubts were. No one else did. I suspect many or even most of us would have been like the other disciples – afraid and afraid to say much. Superficial observation would lead you to conclude that the other disciples had empirical evidence and therefore believed, while Thomas did

not, and therefore doubted. Tell me then why they were all still locked up in that room a week *after* they had seen the risen Lord in their presence?

John is honest throughout his gospel about how clueless the disciples often were. In John 20:9 which we read at the Sunrise Service last week, John admits that they did not understand that Jesus had to be raised from the dead. But if they did not understand *that* Jesus was to be raised, they certainly did not understand *why* he had to be raised, either. After all, they had abandoned their Lord in his hour of need. They had watched the crucifixion from afar; and to a man, they knew they were somehow complicit in what happened.

Mary says Jesus is alive. Even if that is true, what if he is angry? Suppose his first order of post-resurrection business is settling some old scores? Have you ever said some really nasty things about someone behind his or her back, only to discover a short time later that they had gotten wind of what you had said? Are you eager to run into that person again? Or, if you know as a fact that a certain person hates you or blames you for something bad that has happened, and so henceforth refuses to be civil to you, do you go out of your way to be near that person?

Why didn't they go looking for him? Perhaps it was because they were afraid they would *find* him. And so on that first Easter-- a day John 20 makes clear began with weeping and lamenting--the day ends with locked doors and great fear. While we may have shared Thomas' "show me" sentiment, we likely would have been quiet for fear of what might happen to us. The reality this morning is that we still have doubts – doubts that we are afraid to face and verbalize – and a much more serious problem perhaps than Thomas had.

### **From Doubt To Belief**

Somewhere along the line, the Christian Church seems to have gotten the idea that doubt and faith are mutually exclusive. They can't go together. If you doubt, then your faith is null and void. I don't know where that idea comes from, but certainly, the opposite of faith, at least in the Gospels, is not doubt. I agree with Tennyson who claimed: "There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." Frederick Beuchner is a former Presbyterian pastor gives this accurate, if somewhat irreverent definition of faith, saying, "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith – doubt keeps faith alive and moving."<sup>3</sup> Thomas' nickname was "Didymus," "the Twin," and sometimes I believe he is our twin - our representative in the Easter story – the one who represents our doubts.

You see, the opposite of faith, is not doubt, the opposite of faith is apathy and indifference. And if there is one thing we can say for certain about Thomas it's that Thomas is not indifferent when it comes to following Christ.

And what is wrong with doubt anyway? Doubt is useful. If we didn't doubt we would believe everything we see. I don't know about you, but as I have grown

older I have learned to be more skeptical - to doubt what I hear: especially all the junk on the internet. If I get an email saying that something happened, I check it out for myself because so often they are just hoaxes.

There is one famous example that I first encountered it in the 90's. A church member came to me with a petition to sign. The petition claimed that Madelyn Murray O'Hare was trying to get a bill passed in Congress to make reading the Bible on the TV or radio a crime. So it urged Christians to sign it and to make copies to get other people to sign and to write their representatives in Congress. Sounds like a worthy cause not just for Christians but people from other religions too. But it wasn't true. There was no such bill before Congress and never had been. It was all a lie!

So doubt is useful. In fact, it is necessary for survival. It helps protect us from believing things that are not true. It helps keep us from trusting people we don't know who could be dangerous.

But doubt has a dark side. While it can keep us from believing things that are false, it can also keep us from believing that which is true. Doubt can keep people from believing in the power of God and the grace of God. Doubt can keep them from trusting in God's saving grace. Doubt kept Thomas from believing in the resurrection. And it still keeps people today from believing.

There is some physical evidence this morning. There is something that we can see and touch. It doesn't come in the form of an empty tomb, or some ancient relic that someone can pull out and show us and demand that we believe. In John 20:21, Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I have sent you." And as he said this he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Their mission was to go into the world and bear witness to the Truth that was standing before their very eyes. Thomas' story as it comes to us in John's account of the Gospel is told to bear witness to the truth and the hope of the resurrection. It has helped shaped the story of those who came after him, and it now shapes our story.

I think Jesus was aware of our dilemma. He said "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."(John 20:29 – often called the last beatitude.) We may not have the living breathing body of Jesus to point to, but there is still evidence. One piece of evidence of the truth of the resurrection is the living presence of Christ in us. Like the hymn we sang earlier says, "You ask me how I know he lives; He lives within my heart." We cannot see, hear, or touch the risen Christ, but we can experience his presence in our lives. Wherever two or more are gathered in his name, he is there. Just as Jesus was with the disciples in the upper room on that Sunday so long ago, so he is with us here in this room by the presence of His Holy Spirit!

We also have the evidence of what he has done in the world. The changed lives of people show the presence of the risen Christ. If it were not true, could the early

church have had the power to withstand and even flourish in the midst of Roman oppression? Without the living presence of Jesus, could St. Frances of Assisi have given all his wealth to the poor and devoted his life to Christ. Without the living presence of Christ, could Mother Theresa have taken on the burden of ministering to the least in India and leading a movement to do the same world wide? Without the living presence of Christ, could Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Desmond Tutu, and countless others have stood up to oppression without violence?

For 2000 years, the hope that comes with the resurrection of Christ has been manifested literally and figuratively in the witness of the church. The power of God working in our lives is evidence that Christ lives. We don't gather here this morning out of some need for institutional control. We don't gather so that we can tell you how to live your lives, or so that we can define once and for all what is right and wrong. We gather together as a church because we need one another. We need to hold on to the hope and the reality of the resurrection as the risen Christ is seen at work in our lives. It's tough at times. Because we might not always agree, about this doctrine, or that doctrine, how to interpret Scripture, what the future should look like here at East Cobb UMC. But regardless of all that might divide, we come together because that which brings us together is stronger than all the things that divide us *combined!* And Jesus says, "Peace be unto you."

It's not so much that "seeing is believing", but more to the point, "believing is seeing." We have not seen with our eyes. But we have seen with our hearts. We have seen the risen Christ in the changes in our lives and the lives of others. We have seen the Lord! We are indeed blessed because of it!

Christ will come again, as he has promised, and then our doubts may be answered in the light of his presence. But in the meantime, we hold on together to the power of his resurrection as we carry out his mission in this life. Peace to doubting world, peace to our fragile and doubting hearts.

Are you a "doubting Thomas" this morning? Well, look around you. We are the living breathing body of Christ, wounds and all, and we are most definitely alive! That is a step of faith. Then hear the words of Jesus speaking to *you* today, "Do not doubt, but believe."

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Stages On the Way*; Copyright 2000, 1998 ©The Wild Goose Resource Group; published and distributed in North America by GIA Publications, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> *In Search of Stones: A Pilgrimage of Faith, Reason, and Discovery*, M. Scott Peck, M.D., Hyperion, New York, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> *Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC*, Frederick Buechner, Harper San Francisco, 1993.