

April 16, 2023  
Year A  
John 20:19-31  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
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### A Sermon That's Not About Thomas

Cyrus tells me that every year, on the Sunday after Easter, the day known in the church as the second Sunday of Easter, I preach the same sermon.

Obviously, it's not the exact same sermon, probably someone other than Cyrus would have noticed if I preached the exact same sermon every year on the same day. What he means is that every year, on this Sunday, regardless of what stories I tell, regardless of how I get there, I make the same point, come to the same conclusion, say the same things, in defense of Thomas, who bears the unfortunate nickname of "the Unbeliever".

This Sunday in the church, the Sunday after Easter, no matter where it falls on the calendar, which, of course, is entirely dependent on where Easter falls on the calendar, is always Thomas Sunday, the Sunday when Thomas is remembered for his unbelief—and then, of course, for his belief and confession of faith.

After hearing Cyrus's reflection on my redundant sermons, I made the decision that I was not even going to mention Thomas in this sermon, that I wasn't even going to preach on the gospel at all. That would show him.

But then, as I reread our scripture readings from today, a sermon from Peter in Acts and a reflection on faith in First Peter, guess where I found my heart and mind heading. That's right, to the gospel reading. But still I'm determined not to preach about Thomas. So, today is the Second Sunday of Easter. It's Thomas Sunday. Welcome to a sermon that's not about Thomas.

For me, every year, when I hear it, I feel a gasp of shock when I hear Thomas's words, when I hear his statement of unbelief, his refusal to accept the story that his fellow disciples told, "We have seen the Lord" and his macabre demand that he had to touch Jesus' dead body; that he had to put his fingers and hands on Jesus' wounds in order to believe. I think, of Thomas, how could he? That's just gross; it's in incredibly poor taste. What's wrong with Thomas?

Of course, he didn't actually do it. He said that his faith would be conditional on touching Jesus' wounds, but as it turns out, it wasn't. Our gospel reading for today never says that Thomas touched Jesus' wounds. It just says that Jesus offered and upon seeing Jesus, upon hearing his voice, Thomas believed, Thomas said, "My Lord and my God," knowing that he was in the presence of his risen teacher, friend, Lord.

In the gospel of John, the whole good news of Easter starts when Mary Magdalene, weeping at an empty tomb, believing that her teacher's body had been stolen by the Romans, hears a voice that turns her life; that turns the world upside down. She hears Jesus' voice, she hears him call her name and she goes from "brokenhearted woman" to the first apostle, the first one sent with the good news of the resurrection, to preach to Jesus' disciples, the Easter message that is the heart of our faith; that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is alive!

In the gospel of John, that Easter good news continues, the same way, with Jesus' voice, speaking love to his disciples and friends, speaking good news, speaking invitation. Jesus speaks to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe."

As it was for Mary, again, it was the voice of Jesus that called forth hope, that called forth joy, that called forth belief. Thomas, saw Jesus' resurrected body standing before him, and heard his voice, and said, "My Lord and my God!" He did not, apparently, need to have his demands met, did not actually need to touch his resurrected Lord to believe the Easter good news, that Christ was risen; that Christ is risen indeed.

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So, how's this sermon that's not about Thomas going so far? I've been talking about Thomas for most of this sermon that's not about Thomas haven't I?

I've laid so much Thomas backstory down, because I actually, really don't want to talk about Thomas. I want to talk about the other disciples. Peter, James, John, and the rest, who were in that upper room last week, on resurrection day, after Mary met Jesus in the garden and came back to the disciples and told them the meaning of the empty tomb; that Jesus was risen, "I have seen the Lord!" But in order to talk about them, I had to talk about Thomas. So, here we go, this time, for real, a sermon that's not about Thomas.

It was later that same day, the same day that Jesus met Mary Magdalene at the tomb, so last Sunday, Easter Sunday, when our gospel reading for today gets its start. And guess what the disciples weren't doing.

They weren't running around with joy and enthusiasm, having heard the good news of Jesus' resurrection from Mary. They weren't acting like people who had been transformed by the miracle of God's power over death.

In fact, they were acting like what they were, people who knew all too well how the powers of this world were arrayed against them. They knew all about the world's power, the power of empire, the power of religion that doesn't like to change, to welcome, to accept new ideas, new people, the power of categories, that keep people divided, that create an in group and an out group and keep some people powerless, on the outside, whatever it takes. They knew that kind of power, they had seen it drag their Lord, their messiah, Jesus, through the streets of Jerusalem, beaten and bloodied, and hang him on the cross.

What they did not know was what Mary was talking about, when she said, "I have seen the Lord." They didn't know what that meant, they didn't know what kind of power that was. So, the disciples didn't believe.

And that's where we find them in our gospel reading for today. Locked away in their fear and unbelief, in a room, where they were hidden, because they were afraid that someone would denounce them as Jesus' followers, as men who had tried to start a rebellion against the religious authorities of their own religion, as men who had tried to start a rebellion against Rome, as they walked with Jesus into Jerusalem, with the crowds, shouting Hosanna and waving palms, and throwing branches and cloaks at Jesus' feet. In short, they were afraid that they would be seen as people who deserved crucifixion too.

And there they were, in the upper room, with the door locked, terrified that they would hear a knock, or even that the door would just come crashing down, as Temple police or Roman soldiers found them in their hideout.

Instead, Jesus came and stood among them. Jesus just appeared with them, it seems not even using the door, and said, "Peace be with you."

And what did they do? Did they rejoice? Did they celebrate? Did they immediately believe because Jesus was right there, among them?

The text doesn't tell us their immediate reaction. But what it does tell us is that Jesus showed them his hands and his side. And what that tells me is that they didn't immediately get it. They didn't know what was happening. They didn't realize what they were seeing.

Like Mary, in the garden, seeing Jesus but thinking that he was the gardener, until he called her name, they didn't know what to think, what to believe. They had no category of belief for resurrection.

Even though they had been told the story by Mary, what she had seen, what she had heard, it still took them more than a few beats to get it, that Jesus was alive. They had to see him for themselves, to see his wounds, to hear his voice, themselves, to know that Jesus was alive again.

This sermon is not about Thomas, but it's possible that Thomas who is labeled the unbeliever, was quicker to believe than the other disciples, who, from the sound of it, did actually have to investigate Jesus' wounds to know that it was really him, that Jesus was, that Jesus is, truly risen from the dead.

Today's gospel reading is about Thomas, but not really. So, today's sermon isn't about Thomas, at least, not really.

Today's gospel reading, and, in fact, the whole Easter story is about doubt and confusion, about people missing the point, missing the clues, about not seeing what was right in front of them.

It's about Peter and beloved disciple seeing the empty tomb and believing, but not really.

It's about Mary not quite getting it. It's about how she could believe in graverobbers before she could believe in resurrection.

It's about how the disciples were locked away, hiding, even though they had heard that somewhere out there, Jesus was alive again.

So, today's sermon is about doubt and confusion and not getting it, but not really.

Because, of course, the gospel reading, the Easter story, are really not about those things at all.

Instead, the Easter story is really all about the generosity of Jesus who, risen from the dead, comes to get us.

He calls our name in the garden. He shows up in our locked rooms, and gives love and peace and courage. He offers us his wounded body, so that we can touch and taste and see and believe.

The resurrected Jesus showed up for his disciples, for his friends, even when they couldn't believe the story that they were telling each other, that he was alive, that he was with them. And Jesus shows up for us, when we doubt and when we believe.

So, this sermon, that is not about Thomas, or Mary or Jesus' other disciples, is about Jesus and the Easter good news that Jesus is with us. And blessed are we. For Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!