

“Proof Positive”
John 20:19-31
Sunday, April 11, 2021
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Prove it! That’s our knee-jerk response to hearing good news that sounds too good to be true, our joy suspended in mid-air until our minds are thoroughly convinced that what we’ve been told is fact rather than fiction.

Last week, we celebrated the glorious good news of Easter that Christ is alive! Because He lives, our lives are full of the potential for new life to spring forth within us and rich in new opportunities to emerge from us into the life of our world for a brighter tomorrow. Christ is alive, and so is our hope. This morning, we take a plunge from the high of Easter into the depths of doubt on this so-called “Doubting Thomas Sunday.” That very familiar story we all learned in Sunday School — Thomas, the unfaithful disciple because he refused to believe until he saw with his own eyes, that on the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead — with our Sunday school teachers encouraging us to not to be a “doubting Thomas.”

Imagine having your whole life’s legacy reduced to one word forever attached to your name? It’s one thing if it’s flattering, as in forever being known as “Honest Abe,” but quite another if it’s a lasting derogatory statement of your character. Did Thomas really deserve to have his whole life reduced to this moment and be forever known as “Doubting Thomas?” It’s intriguing to wonder why Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples that first Easter evening. Where might he have been? What was he doing that he wasn’t hiding in fear with his closest friends? What’s even more intriguing is that a week later, when Thomas does show up, the other “faithful” disciples are still hiding in fear, even though they had seen with their own eyes our Risen Lord in the flesh. It’s as though witnessing the resurrection hadn’t really changed anything for them. We would think it would have provided them with all the motivation they needed to go out and continue the ministry Jesus entrusted to them. Our Risen Lord had shown up in their midst, filled them with peace, empowered them with the Holy Spirit, and commissioned them saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Our Risen Lord had reminded them that the kingdom of God would only spread here on earth as his faithful followers went forth to proclaim the good news of God’s forgiveness, the power of God’s love to bring about peace and reconciliation and healing and redemption into our fallen world. So, why were they still hiding behind locked doors? Were they sitting there wondering if they had simply gotten caught up in a civil rights movement that couldn’t survive the death of its charismatic leader?

“Doubting Thomas” hadn’t seen the resurrected Lord, and yet, he appears to have been freely moving about in public without being afraid for his life. Could it have been that he was out there in the world trying to find out the truth about what had happened to Jesus’ body? Could he have been making plans for what should happen next to continue Jesus’ ministry in the world?

Was Thomas really as unfaithful or doubting as his nickname suggests? No, not really, if we take a closer look at Thomas' own journey of faith with Jesus. He appears to have been a rather gutsy and outspoken disciple, and he was far from being a coward. Earlier in Jesus' ministry, when Jesus said to the disciples that he needed to go back to Bethany because his good friend Lazarus was dying, the disciples try to talk Jesus out of going, saying, "You can't go back there. The religious leaders will stone you to death for blasphemy." But, it's Thomas who speaks up and says to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go that we might die with him." And, they all did go. Because they did, they witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus and heard Jesus proclaim afterward: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Then again, during the Last Supper, when Jesus gave the disciples his final instructions for how they were to carry on without him, Jesus told them, "In my father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I tell you that I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am there you may also be? And, you know the way to where I am going?" Again, it's Thomas who had the guts to say what he was thinking. Trying to cut through all of Jesus' mystical and downright baffling language, Thomas asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going? How can we know the way?" Thomas spoke his mind. He wanted to understand what was going on so he could face the situation at hand. That doesn't sound like someone plagued by doubt. It sounds like someone who was eager to follow in the footsteps of his leader.

Thomas' relationship with Jesus before the resurrection paints for us a different picture of what happened that night the disciples tell Thomas they have seen the Risen Lord in the flesh. Thomas hears what they are saying, but their body language tells a whole different story. A week has gone by and they aren't re-energized; they aren't out and about proclaiming the Easter message of hope that the God we worship is a God who makes all things new, that change is possible, that the power of God's love is stronger than death. So, gutsy Thomas challenges them: "I hear what you are saying, but I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes, because it doesn't appear to me that what you are saying has made any difference in your lives." Again, Thomas is trying to understand what is happening around him so he can face the situation at hand because he's the only one thinking, "OK, now what?"

When Jesus appears to Thomas, maybe he isn't so much chastising him as much as he's saying Thomas will be the model for every disciple who will follow after him, including those of us sitting here as Jesus' faithful followers, who are to believe in the resurrection without having seen it with our own eyes.

To this day, there are those who hear of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and demand proof, wanting to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that what God promised is true. That Jesus was the first fruits of the resurrection and that we, too, will be raised from the dead just as those whom we have loved and lost have already been resurrected. This hunger for concrete visible evidence is seen whenever there is a

fury about some new archeological dig claiming to have uncovered something that belonged to Jesus. First, it was the Shroud of Turin, believed to have been the burial cloth left lying in Jesus' tomb, until it was proved otherwise. Then, it was the burial box that was found, and those who discovered it claimed it contained the remains of Jesus, offering it as conclusive proof that he had, in fact, not been raised from the dead. That, too, proven to be a hoax. Two years ago, when Notre Dame burned in Paris, a firefighter was hailed a hero for rushing into the burning flames to retrieve one of the cathedral's most prized relics, believed to be the actual crown of thorns. Seeing is believing — you want us to believe in the resurrection, show us some proof!

The concrete visible evidence that on the third day God raised Jesus from the dead was not the wounds he showed Thomas. It was that he and those cowardly disciples hiding in fear were empowered by the Spirit of the Living Lord to come out from behind those locked doors and proclaim the gospel not only in words but with their lives. That makes Thomas' story all the more profound, because the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a matter of seeing is believing — it's a matter of seeing the power of resurrection in the life of the believers. As Easter people, we must ask ourselves, does our body language match the hope we proclaim that others may see and believe in the resurrection power of God?