

## DOUBTING THOMAS

## A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE

SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2013

First Presbyterian Church of Marianna

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John 20:19-31

Of the four gospels, John alone tells us of the story of Doubting Thomas. Jesus appears first in the Upper Room to His disciples, and greets them with the traditional Hebrew greeting, "Shalom!" He may have said, "ἰρηνε", which is what the Greek text says, but I'll bet He said, "Shalom!" It means "peace" and He probably added "alokim" which means, "be with you." That was and is a traditional Middle Eastern greeting.

When He showed them His hands and side, they rejoiced, because they knew of a certainty that He was risen. And this brief little visit ends with Jesus breathing on them, telling them to receive the Holy Spirit, and instructing them in the forgiveness of sins.

Thomas missed it. And so he doubted. And the doubt of Thomas was so great that he made the statement that unless he saw the mark of the nails, and put his finger in the marks, and his hand in the side that was pierced, he would not believe. Bold talk, Thomas.

When they were gathered together again a week later, and Jesus appeared, Jesus offered Thomas that opportunity, and charged Thomas: "Do not doubt, but only believe."

Thomas confesses Jesus as his Lord, as His God.

And Jesus tells all who have ears to hear, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

We are told in the scriptures, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." (Acts 16:31) Everybody should want to be saved. Saved from the fires of hell, from the wrath of God, saved from the eternal consequences of sin.

But there are those who doubt. There are those today who are like Thomas. They have to see with their own eyes. They have to touch with their own hands. They are the people, who, when they see a sign that says "wet paint" on a park bench, have to touch it. And then they've got a "park bench green" finger, and the bench has their fingerprint on it until the next time it is painted. When they'll probably touch it again.

Doubting is different from questioning. There will always be questions about Jesus, about the church, about the Christian faith, that have no answers. There will always be problems with no solutions and situations that just don't fit within the limits of our experience or our theology.

I sometimes question why God's providence and God's grace work the way that they do. I've often said that I see God's will, God's way, most clearly in the rear view mirror, when I look back at the past and see God's providing, guiding hand at work in my life, and in the course of history. I have come to accept that there are some things about God's plan of salvation, about God's purpose and plan not only for my life but for all of creation that I will never fully understand. And I have learned to live with the questions.

Doubt is something else again. Doubt is a feeling that undermines faith. Doubt is the antithesis of belief. Doubt says, "I'm not sure that Jesus is who He says He is." Doubt says, "I'm not sure that Jesus is what the church says He is." Doubt says, "I'm not sure Jesus was really raised up from the dead." Doubt says, "I'm not sure that there is a heaven, or a hell." Doubt says, "I'm not sure there is a life beyond this one, a life everlasting."

Sometimes people doubt because they've seen no proof. Other times, they doubt because they have seen no change in the lives of those who profess to believe.

Well, the folks in that first category of doubters may someday see the proof that they seek. It may come in a strange way, a wonderful way. C.S. Lewis was a doubter, a skeptic, a cynic. And then one day he got in a motorcycle sidecar, and rode through the Queen's Park with his brother. Something about the beauty of that day, the beauty of the park, the wonderful animals grazing there, touched him as no sermon, no book, ever had. When he got into that sidecar, he did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. When he got out, he did. And Lewis became probably the most influential Christian writer in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and his Chronicles of Narnia may just be the next hit series of children's films, in the tradition of Tolkien's "Ring" trilogy or even the Harry Potter movies. From doubter to the apostle to the skeptics, that was his transformation. Lewis's book "Mere Christianity" transformed the lives of many, including Charles Colson, who went from being a Watergate-scandal prisoner to the founder of the largest prison ministry in the world. The movie "Shadowlands" was also based on one of his stories, and his book about his late wife, Joy, and her death, "A Grief Observed" have helped many. But "Jack" Lewis was a doubter, who needed proof, and somehow, just a beautiful day in the park was proof enough.

The folks in the second category, who are looking for a change in the lives of those who profess to believe, who are looking for a difference between Christians and the rest of the world, are probably doomed to lives of bitter disappointment. We 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians often excel at hiding our lights under bushels, and at concealing the difference Jesus makes in our lives from the rest of the world.

But those who have to see with their own eyes, and touch with their own hands, well, they've got it tough.

I wish we who are the church would make it easy on them.

The church is the body of Christ in the world. Jesus is still alive in the church. Some folks only encounter with Jesus is with the church, or with those who are members of it. If we are indeed the body of Christ, we must display Jesus to the world. Some days, the only Jesus the world will see is us.

The church is a colony of heaven. We are supposed to show the world what it is like to live in the kingdom of God. We are reminded in scripture and song that Christ is our King, and we are to have no higher allegiance, no greater loyalty.

The church is the gathering of believers charged with showing the light of the world to a world dwelling in the darkness of doubt and despair. And we often hide our light so that it cannot be seen.

Far too often, we don't live up to what it means to be the church. We don't show the world the Lord that we know. We show too much of our sinful selves, and too little of Jesus to the world.

To those who doubt, I can but say what Jesus said, "Don't doubt, and only believe." Don't believe in me, believe in the One whom I serve. Don't believe in the church, believe in the One who is head of the church. Don't be fooled by the failures of Christians, or of the church: the Lord Jesus Christ will never fail you.

Thomas believed, and confessed that belief, "My Lord and my God!" And in believing, Thomas, like all who believe, had life through His name. We yearn for the day when at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Let us pray.

Lord, when we take on the role of Doubting Thomas, forgive us. Help us to live our lives in such a way as to prove to the doubting world that Jesus Christ does make a difference in our lives. Amen.