

“Feeling Left Out: Doubting Thomas Finds Forgiveness”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
April 15, 2007
Scripture: John 20:19-31

There is something special about being in the church building the week following Easter. The flowers continue to open and add beauty and smell. The annual frantic get-ready-for Easter spring cleaning has the place looking free of clutter, and after careful polishing last week the pews sparkle in the morning and again in the afternoon sun. It felt like the sanctuary contained the echoes of the Windsor Brass from last Sunday, and I don't think I was alone in continuing to hum some of our Easter hymns. My eyes turned to the various He Qi paintings that are on resurrection. Despite the cold weather this week, everything feels pleasant and easy. Easy, that is, until we open the Bible, and Jesus reappears along with that patron saint of skepticism, good old “doubting Thomas.”

As we were planning today's worship service, I asked Kathy “Didn't I preach on Doubting Thomas last year?” Well, it turns out that every year, on the Sunday after Easter, the lectionary, or set of suggested readings, sends us back to take another look at this story.

In previous sermons on this story, I have dealt with the gospel of John's frustrating anti-semitism captured in the line about the doors being locked “for fear of the Jews.” I won't focus on that today, but we should make a point of reminding ourselves that Jesus was a Jew, and the first disciples were Jews. The gospel of John was written much later, as there had become a

clear division between Jews and Christians, and John is writing some of his current disputes back into the story of Jesus.

In previous years, I have looked at doubt, not as the opposite of faith, but as an essential part of it. I think this is one of the reasons why this story reappears in the lectionary every single year – as a reminder to us that faith has ebbs and flows, and those victorious hymns of Easter can become cries of doubt. To tackle this story is to acknowledge the reality of doubt for the earliest disciples, and in our own lives.

One of my very first sermons was on this Bible story, and was about how we, consciously and unconsciously, try to lock doors to keep the startling words of God at bay. How Jesus can break through all those doors we lock to keep life predictable and understandable. The disciples had locked themselves into a small room, and suddenly Jesus was present among them.

But as I read the story again and again this year, I was struck by a different emphasis all together. Thomas was the odd man out in the Easter story. Have you ever felt left out? Do you feel like you are always the last one to find out, the last one to be told? We have all been there, haven't we? The big ____ (Fill in the blank) ____ happened, and you had just left to get some food. The day that huge event happened at work, you had called in sick. Everyone else is laughing as they talk about what Simon said last night on American Idol, and you still don't really know what this American Idol thing is all about. We have all felt left out at one time or another, haven't we? I want you to conjure up in your mind a time when you felt badly left out –

isolated from your friends or family. Can you think of a time like that? That is what, I think, the disciple Thomas must have felt.

It had been a long, long emotionally tiring time. Jesus had been killed, executed, left to die on a trash heap in Jerusalem. And the followers gathered together to support one another, to cry and fall into each other's arms. To sob uncontrollably. In some corners of the room, there were pictures shared, memories of happier days together.

Maybe you have been in a room like that. I know that I have. It is part of the privilege of being alive, to gather together and mourn the death of someone loved deeply. After a while, you need to leave the room for a little while. How often have I entered such a room to encounter one or two folks taking a smoke break. Sometimes the grief comes in waves so strong that you feel the need to be alone for a little while before reentering the room.

We don't know why he wasn't there. We don't know if he stepped out to get an order of sandwiches for everyone, or if he had been handling some of the long list of logistics that a death requires dealing with. Thomas wasn't there. And when he returned to the room, everything had changed.

"We have seen the Lord," they said to Thomas (John 20:25). Even though the doors were still shut and locked, suddenly Jesus was standing among us. And he said, "peace be with you" and showed us his hands and his side. "We have seen the Lord!"

I wonder if he thought they were playing an elaborate, cruel hoax on him. Oh sure, Mary Magdalene had reported earlier that she had seen Jesus that morning.¹ But, as the gospels record, the men had greeted the women's news with deep suspicion – their first century sexism treated the first reports of Jesus' resurrection as nothing more than “an idle tale.”² And now the others are telling him about Jesus just showing up – alive despite the wounds suffered on the cross? That was too much to believe. So Thomas said, “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” (John 20:25).

We don't know if they settled into an uneasy silence at that point, or if the disciples tried with all their hearts to persuade Thomas. Did he storm out of the room again? Did they suggest that if he couldn't believe them that maybe he should leave? There is a long gap in the story - the gospel simply skips a whole week. Kind of a key week to delete the emails and turn off the tape recorder, don't you think? Don't you wonder what happened in that first week after the first Easter? And it must have been a long week for Thomas and for the others. A long week of suspicion and mistrust. A long week for the disciples who had seen Jesus – they must have wondered if they had imagined things, or if they had they been susceptible to some group hallucination. Would they ever see Jesus again? Thomas must have wondered if they had all lost their minds, and was he alone to be the sane one who would try to keep the movement going? A lot can happen in the week following Easter. We don't know what happened, for the Gospel of John skips over the events of that week as he resumes the story.

A [full] week later his disciples were again in the house, and [this time] Thomas was with them. Although the doors were [again] shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:26-28).

I recently read a transcript of a debate between two Christian biblical scholars about the resurrection. John Dominic Crossan argues that the resurrection is best understood as a metaphor, while his debate partner N.T. Wright argued that it was a real, historic event. And I was caught by these words of Wright,

Please note that the resurrection stories in the Gospels do not say Jesus is raised, therefore we’re going to heaven or therefore we’re going to be raised. They say Jesus is raised, therefore God’s new creation has begun and we’ve got a job to do.³

It seems like one of the main points in this story of Jesus reappearing to the disciples was to give them a job to do. There was so much that could have been said, but Jesus chose, or the gospel of John chose, to limit what he said to giving them a commission – a charge.

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21-23).

In this simple summary of his own mission, he now sends the disciples to be agents of forgiveness. Quite a message, when you think about it, from someone who had so recently been executed as a common criminal, betrayed by those in the inner circle, and abandoned at the cross by these same disciples. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” We might expect words that sounded a lot more like the Terminator or John Wayne – you know a warning to all the bad guys. But from Jesus, there was no talk of revenge, no anger even. Just peace and forgiveness.

Forgiveness – it is a complex thing for us. And it must not have been an easy message for that scared, surprised gang of disciples to hear as they huddled behind locked doors. Forgiveness is a tricky thing, of course. Perhaps the disciples remembered the parable Jesus told about forgiveness and the kingdom of heaven.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay

the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” (Matthew 18:23-33)

If Jesus could come back from the cross with forgiveness on his lips, well, they knew they would have to begin by forgiving one another. Jesus came back into that room after Thomas returned. And his greeting to Thomas was the same as it had been when he had been out, “Peace be with you.” And, just as he had showed the other disciples his hands and his side, Jesus offered to let Thomas see and feel his hands and side. Jesus began to model for the disciples what their new community, what the church, would have to be about in these post-Easter days. Welcoming people back in. Healing suspicions and divisions.

We will never get to hop on a time machine and go back to that locked room with the disciples and see if we would respond like Thomas or one of the other disciples. We won't get the chance to put our fingers in the nail wounds in Jesus hands like what is happening on our bulletin cover, nor will we get to see the gash in Jesus' side.

The gospel of John is written for people like us, for people who will never get to see all the glory of Jesus' resurrection with our own eyes, and yet, in a mixture of doubt and belief have come to faith. It is to us that John addresses Jesus' final words, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29).

Thomas was not to be left out, Jesus made sure of that. Too often the church makes people feel left out. Left out for not believing quite enough. Left out for not being there at the beginning, for not knowing about the time that big event happened. And if Jesus came back to make sure that Thomas would not be left out, maybe the disciples realized that they needed to open those doors that they had locked tightly. After Easter, the doors are opened and no one gets left out. Amen.

¹ John 20:18

² Luke 24:11.

³ Robert Stewart, ed., The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) 21.