

“Peace Be With You”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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John 20:24-29

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

²⁷Then 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.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Doubting Thomas.

We all know who he is. He’s been the butt of countless jokes and snarky cartoons over the years.

The one who didn’t believe.

The fellow who wanted evidence.

The guy who essentially inspired the sobriquet of Missouri, the “Show Me” state.

But is any of this fair to him? Was Thomas really some kind of spiritual laggard? And if not, just what was John up to when he told this story at the conclusion of his Gospel? The burning question for us then is this: was Thomas’ faith somehow lacking, or is it our understanding of this passage that falls short?

Thomas, you may recall, has appeared before in the Gospel of John. Back in chapter 11, verse 16, he makes an appearance in the story of Lazarus’ resurrection. Jesus has told the disciples he is going to his friend’s home to restore the dead man, and his followers are fearful, for going there will require traveling through hostile territory. Thomas, though, says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Then later in chapter 14, verse 5, during his Farewell Discourse, Jesus says that he is going ahead to prepare a place for his followers, and that they know where he is going. Thomas demurs, saying, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” To which Jesus replies, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through

me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

The picture we draw from these earlier incidents tells us a lot about Thomas. He is a pessimist, but a believer. He is bullheaded, but he is committed to Jesus. And when something does not make sense to him, he asks questions, seeking further illumination. Clearly, this is not a feckless man, a man of light spiritual ballast. We see here one of the Twelve, one who has been with Jesus for the whole journey, the good and the bad. Legend has it that Thomas would go on to bring the Gospel to the Indian sub-continent. That would have involved a trek of thousands of miles through alien cultures and difficult terrain, not something that would be undertaken by one filled with doubt. So what is going on here?

This episode takes place at the probable conclusion of John’s Gospel, which is a carefully developed, twenty-chapter argument in the form of a witness, a testimony to Jesus Christ, and it was intended to help people believe that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. This Gospel was an evangelistic tool, and its penultimate words, if one accepts the proposition that Chapter 21 was a later addition, were spoken by Thomas, who declares, “My Lord and my God!” after being satisfied that Jesus had indeed been resurrected.

So, we have a testimony that culminates in a declaration of faith, a clear statement of the identity of Jesus. All is well and good, right?

Well, not quite. What are we to make of Jesus’ riposte to Thomas’ declaration? Jesus’ words—“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”—seem almost like a put down. But are they? What is going on here?

I believe that rather than looking at this as a critique of Thomas, we would do better to see it as a compliment of future believers. Jesus spoke favorably of those who would believe without the advantages of his companions. Thomas had the chance to see and touch the Risen Christ, the other disciples were visited by Jesus after his own death, and lest, we forget, Mary and Peter and the Beloved Disciple were all at the empty tomb the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Future believers would still have faith but without the benefit of any of these experiences. This kind of belief is indeed worthy of praise.

Yet, just how would these believers come to know Jesus? John might argue that his Gospel would be one way that men and women would come to faith. There would also be the other Gospels and the writings of Paul and the authors of the Epistles. People’s hearts might be warmed by the Lord, as John Wesley claimed his had been. But what I suspect would draw people into the church, more than witness, more than preaching, more than liturgy, would be community. It was the body of believers gathered together

who would show the world that something truly special was going on amongst the followers of Jesus, and that in turn would attract newcomers to his Way.

Remember that in the first century, the Church rose in the face of persecution and suspicion. Its members provided things people needed, like food and companionship and acceptance. It cared for those often ignored by the wider society, and made no distinction based on social status, sex, nationality. A free person and a slave, the Church argued, were on an equal footing, a novel, indeed revolutionary claim. This idea of a community with different standards from those prevalent in the Greco-Roman world was not just idle talk. It was a transformative reality for so many. When early Christians began to disregard these principles, and the rich gained precedence over the poor, no less a figure than Paul was outraged. Take a look at his First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul loved that community, and when it began to stray from right teaching and living, he called out its members. Paul knew that the church was the body of Christ, which was not just a metaphor, but something more, a living witness to its inspiration. The community of the faithful was the way in which Jesus made himself known to future believers—whether they lived in the late first century or the early decades of the twenty-first.

With all of this in mind, let us return to Thomas. I cannot believe that Jesus was disappointed because his disciple had questions, or even wanted proof, of what was a truly singular, unprecedented event. Thomas had shown previously that he believed in his teacher's mission, that he was committed to following Jesus. What Thomas failed to do, and this would have raised some eyebrows, was remain true to his community, to the disciples with whom he had lived and worked and grown in faith those past three years.

In the wake of Jesus' crucifixion, Thomas went off on his own. Perhaps it was to mourn, maybe he wanted to hide. We do not know. Whatever the reason, he was absent when his friends needed him, when they, too, were suffering over the death of their teacher. Paul, in the fifth verse of the second chapter of his Second Letter to the Corinthians, writes that "[I]f anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you." Here, he makes clear, it is not the individual but the whole that is important. A believer does not exist in isolation, or as the poet and Anglican cleric John Donne put it, "no man is an island." Yes, one may try to be apart, to fly solo, but people like Paul and John, inspired by Jesus, knew this was not compatible with being fully Christian. The way of Jesus is focused outward, on showing one's faith through the service that one renders unto others. Thomas stumbled because he cut himself off from his community—both from serving it and from being sustained by it. In the process, he was reducing its ability to offer a wider witness to the world of who Jesus was.

Now, we should give Thomas some credit. He did return to his friends, and while he sought proof, he was also opening himself up to disappointment. He could just have

easily turned his back on the disciples, on his time with Jesus, and gone off into the future by himself. He could have chosen to seal off the past and not chance further hurt.

But he didn't.

Thomas did return to his companions, and he then he took a risk on the possibility that Jesus had indeed been resurrected. In fact, I would note he never denied the possibility. He just wanted proof it happened. Would you or I be so open to this occurrence or would we have simply dismissed it out of hand? While we need not answer that question now, we would all do well to ponder it. And after considering that question, we might consider when and where we have removed ourselves from a fellowship, a community, a church.

There are many benefits to being part of a community. One may find friendship, or support, or assistance. One may enjoy companionship or the ability to serve others, to work together on an initiative. And all of these are good things. But look at this list, and one may notice it is all transactional—and that is not what Jesus was all about.

Immediately before the lesson for this sermon, during the time the disciples were gathered together but Thomas was absent, in verses 19 and 21, Jesus tells the disciples, “Peace be with you.” He does so again in verse 26. Think about that.

Peace be with you.

In the midst of their loss, of their confusion, of their worries, Jesus wished peace for his followers. When they were disturbed and ill-at-ease, Jesus wished them peace. And he looked at them as a group, breathing on them, and giving them the Holy Spirit. This gift, the comforter, the sustainer, was to be experienced in community, and not alone.

This passage is apt for our moment. In this time of social distancing, when people are often at home, the temptation to pull back, to lose oneself to solitude, can be strong. But it is at such moments that the church needs us and is there for us in this moment when we need it.

Though we do not gather in person, we worship together.

Though we are not holding in-person meetings, we still do ministry together.

Though our doors are not presently open to the public, the church is still here.

The church is with each of you in your homes, joined together by the bonds of affection and concern and faith. You are not like Thomas, going off alone frustrated or hurt after something bad has happened. Instead, you, the people of this church, are like the other disciples, who remained together; You are holding, calling, emailing and writing one another, seeking to be present for and to help one another.

People have sought ways stay in touch, to maintain contacts with family and friends. Though our daily rhythms have been upset and our familiar routines have been disrupted, we continue as God's people, as followers of Jesus Christ, joined by the Holy Spirit, showing the world what the church can do and be.

It would not have been fair to ask Thomas to know the old children's rhyme, since no church buildings existed in his day. But you know the one to which I refer, and we all know the words and remember the hand movements:

Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Look inside. And see all the people.

It is all of us, together, who are the church. In this day, and in the days to come, whether we are gathered together in cyberspace or in the future reunited in worship and celebration, let us never forget that it is here, in this fellowship, that we find the love of the Lord, the power of the Holy Spirit—and the life-sustaining peace of Jesus Christ.

Peace be with you, indeed.