

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“A Sermon for Doubters”

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

[19] When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [20] After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [21] Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." [22] When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

[24] But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So 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."

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

[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. [31] But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

LIVING IN A WORLD OF DOUBT

Today's sermon is a sermon for doubters. I'm going to ask two questions. 1. Who are the doubting Thomases in our midst today? 2. Why do they doubt?

The answer to the first question is easy. Doubters are everywhere.

Jon Meacham, the editor of Newsweek magazine wrote an article recently entitled, "The End of Christian America." He noted that there are more hard core doubters in our country than ever before.

When people last filled out those polls that say what religious group they are affiliated with, what do you think is the fastest growing group? The fastest growing group is "none of the above." That group of doubters has almost doubled since 1992!

All over the country people are expressing their doubts.

But, doubters are not limited to those outside the church. There are doubters among us as well. There are those among us who want to believe but still have reservations about the traditional Christian faith.

Last week was Easter. Churches were full. The music was great. We proclaimed the Good News. “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” Surely we have banished the doubters from our church with those joyous affirmations of faith.

But, every preacher knows that the affirmations don’t seem to last very long. There’s a very good reason that the second Sunday of Easter is also known in some quarters as “low Sunday!”

Wouldn’t it be great if we could sing the Halleluiah chorus all year long? But, we can’t. Doubt comes creeping into church the very next week.

All of us experience doubts from time to time. If we say we have no doubts we are either kidding ourselves or we’re asleep. Doubts are a natural part of life and faith. We are all a mixture of faith and doubt. The more important question that we need to consider this morning is this: why do we doubt?

WHY DO WE DOUBT?

Some of us doubt because we just can’t imagine a God that really cares about us personally. God is too big, and we are too small. In a New York subway, there was some graffiti on the wall that read, “God is alive. He just doesn’t want to get involved.”

Many people have that view of God. God is the prime mover, the one who got it all going. But, now it’s all up to us. God in this view is like a big clock maker. He wound it up and put it on its course. But, now God has nothing to do with creation.

God is alive. He just doesn’t want to get involved. We can all understand why people might have this view. After all when we consider the vastness of the universe and what a tiny speck of cosmic dust the earth really is ... why should God care about us?

I am reminded of the way the Psalmist expressed it long ago. He asked rhetorically, “O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow.” Psalm 144:3-4

This viewpoint has been confirmed by the great scientists of our day. Watch some of those Discovery Channel or Science Channel specials on the creation of the universe, and you will be amazed at how our universe was created.

When we look at the expansive universe, it is mind blowing. We are indeed are indeed a very, very tiny and insignificant part of creation. The idea that the God who created this astoundingly expansive universe would care for little old us is just hard to believe.

I remember a phrase from an old church camp song that we used to sing. In the song, “Pass It On” there is a line about a “god who didn’t care who lives a way out there.”

That’s the god many in our world believe in, the god who doesn’t care who lives a way out there. They doubt that god could be personally involved in our affairs. We are just too small, and god is just too big.

Sometimes our personal experience seems to confirm this. When you look at the tragedies that are part of our world, you very well might come to the conclusion that either god is not involved or that god is powerless to do anything about what happens in our world. Maybe you might even believe that god doesn’t exist.

A few years ago I stumbled across the atheist website, and most of their arguments were a variation on this theme. They would often say, “If there is a god, then why does god allow cancer to exist?”

You don’t have to be an atheist to ask that question. Most of us have experienced terrible losses in our life, and we have asked that same question. Why did God allow this to happen? Personal tragedies can cause us to doubt.

DOUBT IN THE BIBLE

The Bible does not shy away from the theme of doubt. The biblical book of Ecclesiastes is all about doubt and cynicism. Long ago the writer of that book wrote, “... vanities of vanities! All is vanity.” In other words it’s all meaningless.

According to the writer of that book we work hard and study hard all our life and what happens? You get old, forget everything that you’ve ever learned and leave all your money to your children who squander your hard won earnings on bad real estate deals!

The Bible can be a very up to date book. Don’t think that cynicism is a modern phenomenon. Long ago the preacher of Ecclesiastes expressed the doubts of this generation, “Nobody cares any more. It doesn’t make any difference what I do. Why should I bother?”

Our situation is much like the situation faced by those early disciples. We read this morning that the doors to their home were locked out of fear. Aren’t we tempted to do the same thing? The outside world is a fearful place, and the only way to maintain our hope is to shut the door tight and huddle together for mutual support.

But, no matter how many padlocks we put on the door ... it just won’t work. The fears and dangers that you find out there ... you’ll also find in here. The pain and sorrow that

you find out there ... you'll also find in here. The doubt and cynicism that you find out there ... you'll also find in here.

We need something more than just the testimony of some fearful disciples if we are to believe. We need to see Jesus in all his glory for ourselves. We also need an encounter with the risen Christ.

THE RISEN CHRIST COMES

That's exactly what happened to those first despondent disciples. The risen Christ was able to break through those doors that were closed out of fear and disbelief. He appeared to them and said to them as he had said so often before, "Peace be with you."

But, did you notice that they don't seem to recognize him until he shows them his scars? John says, "He showed them his hands and his side." And it was then and only then that they really saw that it was Jesus and rejoiced.

Jesus also said something else that you might find strange. He breathed the life giving Spirit into them ... kind of a redoing of the creation story in which God breathed into the nostrils of the first man and woman and made them living beings.

And then Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." I like the way Craig Barnes explains this. He suggests that Jesus is entrusting us with his own ministry of forgiveness.

He wrote,

"There are so many things we can do for ourselves in the spiritual life. We can read the Bible, pray and even worship on our own. But when it comes to hearing that we are forgiven, we need a priest. That's the priest's calling -- to declare the absolution of sins.

If we do not forgive those who hurt us, the only alternative is to retain the sins. To retain means to hold and to hold onto hurt is to lock ourselves into the identity of victim. In the words of Lewis Smedes, 'When you forgive you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you.'"

The disciples who touched the wounds of the risen Christ were also freed from the wounds of their sinful past, and that's why they rejoiced. But, this was not true for Thomas.

Thomas shows up later. He wasn't with the disciples for that first Easter appearance. They try to tell Thomas what they have seen, but Thomas is from Missouri. "Show me," he says.

"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 that was pierced by the spear, I will not believe."

A week later the risen Christ again surprises the disciples with his presence. This time Thomas is also present, and Jesus tells him, “See my hands? Take my nail scarred hands in your hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my wounded side. Stop doubting and believe.”

We don’t know if Thomas actually took Jesus up on his offer, but we do know that Thomas did believe. He cried out, “My Lord and my God!”

A FAITH WITHOUT WOUNDS

In this passage we have a connection between belief in the risen Christ and the scars of Christ. Resurrection did not eliminate his scars. He still had scars. The Christ of Easter still bears the scars made on Good Friday.

The scars produced recognition and belief. Through his scars doubt was overcome. Through his scars forgiveness was offered.

Yet many act as if we should erase those scars. They promote a brand of Christianity that is all positive all the time. All obstacles are eliminated. Everyone who believes is seen as the epitome of success.

A woman who had recently converted to the Christian faith was told by her community, “If you are a Christian, a real Christian, you will always feel joy in your heart.” But, she still felt a great sadness, even after becoming a Christian.

Was something wrong with her? Was her faith not yet firm?

No, this particular woman was abused as a child. And though her Christian faith had brought her much happiness, she still bore the scars of what happened to her as a child.

It occurs to me that many people have trouble believing in the risen Christ because they have been fed this line about Christians always being happy. I’ve been a Christian a long time. I’ve come to know Christians from every part of the world. And you know what? Like our Savior, they all have scars.

Garrison Keillor said that we all have a backstage view of ourselves. That is, we know what we are really like. We might hide our doubts from others, but we know all about our weaknesses and our scars. We know all about how we have failed and disappointed the ones we love the most.

There is no use denying the truth. We all have scars, and so does our Savior. Thomas knew, and that’s why he doubted.

Thomas said, “I won’t believe that it’s Jesus unless I touch his scars because I know that Jesus has wounds. Some of those wounds are due to my failure and lack of courage when the time of testing came.”

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Thomas and those first disciples also knew that Jesus insisted on healing via the human touch. They knew that Jesus did not hover above the heartaches of the world. Jesus was there ... right in the middle of it all. Jesus embraced the pain of the world.

Jesus touched the leper. Jesus healed the sick. Jesus was moved to tears by those who were bereaved. Jesus lived as we live. Jesus died as we must die.

The distinctive thing about this Savior as compared to the other would be “saviors” in the world is this: he still had scars. The Bible tells us that the scars of Jesus either enable us to believe or they become a great stumbling block to faith.

One of the earliest heresies in the church was a heresy called Docetism. Docetism said that Jesus, the Son of God did not really suffer on the cross. He did not really live on this earth. He only appeared to suffer. He only appeared to be human.

You see, the ancient world had the same trouble with the Christian message as our modern world. They believed in a God who was alive but not involved.

Early on the church said no to Docetism. The early church said that we’ve got to keep the scars. In fact we read in 1 Peter 2:24, “...by his wounds you have been healed.”

Only a wounded Savior can heal. And perhaps it takes a wounded Christian, a Christian with scars to effectively proclaim the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians wrote that we should take our cue from Jesus. Jesus humbled himself. He left heaven’s glory to take on the limitations of human flesh. He lived for us. He died for us on a cross.

And we should have that same kind of humility. We too should be willing to be scarred for the sake of the kingdom. (Philippians 2:5-8)

The market is flooded with Christian self help books that teach us to be a success at this or that. Can you imagine a preacher in one of our most successful churches writing a book entitled, “Everything I Have Done Wrong?”

It happened, and it’s not a short book. St. Augustine, one of the great scholars and preachers in the church wrote his book of Confessions back in the fourth century. He wrote, “I will now call to mind my past foulness and the carnal corruptions of my soul; not because I love them, but that I may love thee, oh my God.”

Obviously Augustine did not try to cover up the scars left by past experiences. His attitude was the same as that of Christ Jesus. He did not lift himself above the human experience. Instead, he talked freely about how at various times he succumbed to the temptations and trials of life.

The late Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled *The Wounded Healer*. Henri was a psychiatrist as well as a priest, and he suggested a very practical way to be compassionate toward others. Use your own wounds as a way of understanding the needs of others.

(Now don't misunderstand. This doesn't mean immediately showing others your own "battle scars" when they have a problem. Henri meant that we should silently use our deep pain as a way of understanding and helping others. People instinctively know when we are connecting with them on a deep level.)

A preacher remarked that whenever he went to a new church there was always a string of people who came to him to tell him about some past wound they had suffered. And he asked,

"Why did they tell me? Did they just want to wallow again in self-pity for some wrong with which they had been afflicted? No, I think that they tell me so that I will know them. You will know me ... they seem to say ... even as Thomas knew the risen Christ ... by my scars."

I have found this to be profoundly true. I do not really know a person until I know something of their scars.

FINDING THE WOUNDED HEALER TODAY

A woman was assaulted in her own backyard at ten in the morning. It was a terrible thing, but through the efforts of a good counselor and a loving husband, she made her way back to sanity.

One day she called her pastor. She said that her counselor wanted her to tell someone other than a family member or a pastor what happened to her. To whom would she tell her story? To whom should she ask for help?

She said, "I want to tell the story to John." (John was the sometimes recovering ... often not recovering alcoholic. In the past four years John had held and lost four jobs.)

The pastor replied, "I thought you might want to tell another woman. Why do you want to tell John?" She said, "Because John knows what it's like to go to hell and live to tell about it."

Strangely enough sometimes there are wounds that can heal. Strangely enough sometimes one whom the world regards as a failure bears wounds that can lead to another's wholeness. Strangely enough doubt can sometimes be erased when we touch the wounds of the risen Christ.

And where do we find the risen Christ today? The Bible tells us that wherever people are wounded by life, the Spirit of Christ is there as well. And when we touch the wounds of others, we touch the wounds of Christ. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Maybe none of us are healed unless it is through the touch of a wounded healer.

I don't know about you, but I find it hard to be helped by someone who hasn't been there ... some docetic deity who hasn't been touched by the pain of the world.

But, thank God that's not the Savior we worship. He is risen, but he still has scars. And it is through his scars that we recognize him. It is by his scars that we are healed of our fears and our doubts.

When we place our hands in the nail scarred hand then that we can say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God." Then that we can stop doubting and believe.

He still has scars. And by his wounds we are healed.

Amen.