

Sermon – 2nd Easter
John 20:19-31
April 23, 2017

“Easter’s Other Resurrection - Thomas”

The great 19th century English Poet Alfred Lloyd Tennyson once said: “*There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds*” - which is to say that as humans we are prone to investigate rather than accept at face value most any statement. If I might hazard a modern version of Tennyson – “*there lives more faith in honest doubt than about 98% of all tweets.*” I used to always tell my kids (alright I used to harp on them they would say) when they fussed about some situation, that they should never worry about things you either have no control over or all the facts about.

It is Easter evening in our lesson from John. To say the disciples were worried would be an understatement. They are not in control of anything and clearly didn’t have all the facts - about Jesus that is. A disciple named Thomas is the most fact deprived of all, and from that disadvantage has earned an unpleasant and frankly undeserved reputation. Mention the names of Jesus’ disciples and I’ll bet the first word that comes into your mind when you hear “*Thomas*” would be “doubt”. So closely have we associated Thomas with this word that we have coined a phrase to describe anyone we think wavers in their conviction about anything – calling such persons a “*Doubting Thomas.*”

Thomas does not fare well at all in the gospel of John. In John 11:16, the story of the raising of Lazarus, he sounds either exasperated or just plain sarcastic when Jesus tells his followers he is going back to Lazarus’ home town in Judea, a region crawling with Jesus’ opponents. Thomas opines “*let us also go, that we may die with him.*” Later, in John 14:5 he questions Jesus’ about his statement that he is going away and the disciples should “*know the place where I am going.*” “*Lord we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way*” – leading to Jesus’ now immortal response “*I am the way, and the truth and the life.*”

But if Tennyson is correct about faith residing in “honest doubt” – then Thomas was a man of faith. Quite frankly, Thomas may be the most admirable of the twelve – because he probes Jesus. He has intense interest in what Jesus is up to in the world and he has the temerity to ask questions about it. On Easter evening – by all appearances his faith had died. Thomas has no questions – he is a man of certainty – certain that dead men don’t rise. His doubts about “Jesus sightings” engender a decisive response – “*I will not now nor will I ever believe it*” – unless I see him myself. On Easter evening Thomas, a faithful man of honest doubt is a bewildered man with little hope. Whether his response to the other’s report is terse – or just tired – it’s a strong denial of a future possibility.

And history has piled on Thomas for it. I suggest however Thomas is an epitome more than an adversary of faith. Never mind Alfred Lloyd Tennyson - if the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews is correct – faith is assurance, but not of things seen but of hoped for. As Paul says in Romans, who has faith in what he sees? Thomas is a lucky one – his faith became his sight. But the blessed ones, believe it or not, are you and me. We will not see nail pierced hands or a spear lacerated chest, and yet we are here today because we believe dead men do rise. And that belief, pierced by our own sorrows and shredded as it may be by our own sins has brought us here to worship a man whose resurrection from the dead changes everything for us and within us.

Pastor Harry Wendt, a man I am honored to call a friend and delighted to have had as Bible teacher, once told a class I was a part of that when the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven, he did not leave this earth so much as he transformed his appearance in it. Easter evening and particularly its central character Thomas proves that statement true. We tend to gloss over the fact that in this story of a doubting Thomas we have the one place in the all the Gospels where the divinity of Jesus is unequivocally stated. The story that gives Thomas his dubious name is the same story that has Thomas making a remarkable confession of faith - “*my Lord and my God.*” Thomas is the first to confess the faith of the church – to speak with certainty that torn human flesh was proof that divine love beats human sin!

But Easter eve was not exclusively a victory celebration. A lot of doubters went to bed in Jerusalem that night and woke quite untouched or un-swayed by the events in that upper room. Easter eve was the start – not the end of God’s work in the world. Our celebration of Easter last week was no different. Outside the walls of this church a lot of folks are untouched or un-swayed by the church’s gospel. Spirituality is common in our culture, but worship participation isn’t. Bible apps are commonplace on our phones, but application of Christ’s message not so common in our nation’s morals. This congregation like so many used to count more members than it does today. Business, government and education sectors of our nation used to presume faith – primarily Christian, but no more.

Yet the worst thing we can do as Christians is circle the wagons, huddle together wondering what happened and what, if anything, can we do now? This congregation believes that knowing Jesus is a life changing experience. Thomas as our witness, it is! On Easter evening Jesus came and stood among the disciples – they knew not how. I know all about the legal restrictions and cultural prohibitions about sharing faith these days, but I also know this – Jesus can get into any room that you can. He’s not gone, he’s transformed his appearance, and now days he bears a striking resemblance to you!

II Thessalonians 1:2 says “*The name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him.*” Blessed is he who has not seen and yet believes – that is quite true. Blessed are you who believe despite what you see is even more so. Let every room you enter be one the name Jesus is honored in. AMEN