

**2 Easter
April 19, 2020**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

Sermon by The Rev. Deena M. Galantowicz

Always on the Sunday after Easter Sunday we have the Gospel reading about Thomas ... doubting Thomas, who needs to see before he can believe ... but I think this Gospel is about us...who also have not seen. Think of what we have been through and imagine what may be ahead. But focus on how this Gospel message ends ... "There are many things not written...BUT these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, YOU MAY HAVE LIFE These words ARE written that WE may have life! YES, life. Right now – not fear - LIFE!

To begin, I would like to share this wonderful little story, maybe a Reader's Digest kind of story. A man stood in front of a window in an art store where a picture of the crucifixion was on display. The bleeding, dying, suffering form of the central figure had utterly captured him...so much so that he was unaware of a little boy who was standing next to him, also transfixed by the picture. Finally, acknowledging him, the man turned to the little guy to see if he realized what he was looking at. He said, "Son, do you know who that is?" And the young boy quickly replied, "Yes, Sir, THAT'S our Savior!" The man was so surprised that this little one could say that so readily. But, the young boy was even more surprised that he was standing with an adult who did not seem to know what the picture was all about, so he told him the story about Jesus. He pointed to characters in the picture: he said: those are the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. Then, he pointed to a woman at the foot of the cross...and he said... "That's his mother, see, she's crying." The boy then just shoved his hands into his pockets and got very quiet. After quite a silence the young boy said, "Yes, sir, that's Jesus, and they killed him."

"Where did you learn all this?" the man asked. "At Sunday school", the boy said. Well, now the man... with a tangle of feelings... looked yet again at the window and then walked away. BUT, the boy realized he had not finished the story, so he ran after the man and breathlessly caught up with him and said, "Oh, Mister, Oh, Mister..." I forgot to tell you...HE ROSE AGAIN! Yes Mister, HE ROSE AGAIN! That's the most important part!"

So...Back to Thomas. Why this focus on Thomas today? Well, I think it gives us a chance to really consider what Easter means to us. Is it the most important part of the story as the little boy said it was? Let's go back to Maundy Thursday. The disciples were gathered together with Jesus in the upper room. They had assembled in LOVE. To eat a meal of fellowship...a family group gathered together in caring LOVE. But... then it was Sunday...three days later...and they found themselves back again in the same room. The very same way we all yearn to gather together again in THIS Holy Room. How deeply changed was their mood! THIS TIME they were gathered together by FEAR! By numbing, overpowering FEAR. And there was good reason for their fear. After all, their rabbi, their leader, their friend, had been condemned and executed on a political charge. So, weren't they guilty

of the same charge? Would not the authorities consign all of them to the same fate as their beloved master?

But, it was more than that. If the experience of our own lives and hearts is any guide...adding to their concern and dismay as they had gathered then – there was something far worse. There was the political reality of the situation. THEIR DEAREST FRIEND WAS DEAD. While dying on the cross HE said, “It is finished.” And now, within each of them was this terrifying void...the terror that the future would not hold the promises that Jesus had taught.

!! But then...THEN...the impossible happened. “JESUS CAME AND STOOD AMONG THEM.”

We do not have a record of HOW this happened...the Biblical record is only that it DID happen...and we read the result of what happened...”The disciples were FILLED with joy when they saw the Lord and he said to them: “Peace be with you. As the father sent me, so am I sending you.” And then, he commissioned them -- to do -- his work -- of love.

Now, Thomas was not on the scene when this happened. On hearing about it from the other disciples, he was struck by how they had changed. He didn’t for a minute accept or understand their report. He was a realist. And...Aren’t we at times, as hard to convince as Thomas? We’re not about to be taken in by some wish or fantasy. We’re with Thomas. We want actual evidence.

Christ is risen? How CAN this be? Thomas says, unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will not believe. Yet, even to that realist it happened. Eight days pass and the Lord appears to the disciples again; this time Thomas IS one of them. Knowing Thomas’ concern, the Lord addresses him directly: “Put your finger here, see my hands: do not be faithless, but be believing.” Without moving a muscle, no longer needing to touch him, Thomas proclaims THE great confession of faith, “My Lord and My God!”

What can we suppose occurred in the life of Thomas in those days between his statement of doubt and his proclamation of faith? Thomas has been known as doubting Thomas...but there is more to Thomas than that. For example, there is his honesty and his courage. John’s Gospel tells us of THREE incidents where his honesty and forthrightness shone through. Earlier on in today’s Gospel, we read that Jesus had left Jerusalem under pressure because the citizens had threatened to stone him. And then came the news that his dear friend, Lazarus, was dead. Mary and Martha, the two sisters of Lazarus, pleaded with Jesus to come. The family lived on the edge of Jerusalem in Bethany. And in this time of personal tragedy they needed Jesus. Thomas, knowing that the people of Jerusalem had already tried to stone Jesus twice before, blurted out...” Let us also go, that we may die with him.” That certainly took courage both to offer to go with Jesus...and to state his view that death was certain.

And then remember the time when Jesus tried to prepare the disciples for his death. He talked about a house with many rooms. Thomas did not understand -- and he said so. How many times do you or I hear something and we do not understand but we don’t say so? But, Thomas spoke right up. “Lord, we don’t know where you are going...HOW can we know the way?” THIS disciple dared to tell the Lord how he felt.

The third incident about Thomas is the subject of our Gospel for today. The crucifixion has happened. Thomas's beloved Jesus is gone from him. He has wept all his tears. And then comes the strange tale "He is risen!" But Thomas candidly says, "Unless I see the nail prints ... and feel the place in His side - I will not believe."

But it was precisely this courageous honesty which was able to lead Thomas through his unbelief to a genuine encounter with something so mystical -- Jesus had said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." To be honest in the midst of any of our struggles, of any of our doubts, can bring us closer to genuine acceptance. Don't be afraid or unsettled by your doubts. Hear Jesus say to Thomas -- to you -- Be not faithless -- but be believing.

We do not know what took place in those eight days between doubt and faith. Could we even describe what takes place for US in our times of doubting? We DO know that Thomas was honest and courageous and -- did -- not -- shut -- himself -- off.

The Gospel says, "Eight days later the disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them." There was a PERHAPS in his mind and in his heart -- and that perhaps ... that openness, led him finally to a genuine faith experience.

Thomas' doubt -- representing that of all who come after him -- is turned to certainty. It is Thomas -- yes -- doubting Thomas who stands alone among the disciples and declares that Jesus IS GOD: It is Thomas who proclaims, "My Lord - and my God." I think THAT is the good news ... news filled with hope for each one of us.

I think this says that when life seems a bit unbearable, or we feel our faith is being challenged uncomfortably ... well, we are in good company! Thomas' experience can give us courage in our times of doubting.

When we wonder how our unrest or a feeling of the absence of God's peace is SO disquieting for us ... the experience of Thomas suggests our answer ... the unrest is to be stilled, the promise is revealed, when we GAZE upon the wounds of the Body of Jesus Christ. For at that time, we may see FOR OURSELVES the truth which comes through all that suffering.

God before whom we shout Alleluia! at Easter, is no stranger to our pain. No suffering, no loss, no loneliness, no heartache known to you and to me is unknown to our God, who in Jesus brought peace to Pharisees and publicans, to thieves and fishermen, to adulteresses and saintly widows.

Probably, most of us experience many moments like Thomas. Many moments of doubt. And as He did for Thomas, so Jesus does for you and me. He shows us His suffering. We need only to look around us to see the broken body of Christ. It is us! Yes, He grants us the grace to see His wounds in every suffering that touches us! And through this, Jesus says to the Thomas in all of us, "Peace I am with you ALWAYS. Peace be with you. Peace to you and to all whom you love."

Some of you may have heard me share this story, but, I'll never forget reading about how Winston Churchill had planned his own funeral, which took place in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He included many of the great hymns of the church and used the eloquent Anglican liturgy. At his direction, a bugler, positioned high in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, intoned, after the

benediction, the sound of Taps, the universal signal that says the day is over. But then came the most dramatic turn: As Churchill instructed, as soon as Taps was finished, another bugler, placed on the other side of the great dome, played the notes of Reveille – It's time to get up; it's time to get up; it's time to get up in the morning. That was Churchill's testimony that at the end of history, the last note will not be Taps; it will be Reveille.

Alleluia. He is Risen – the Lord is Risen indeed – Alleluia

AMEN