

**“The Tale of Thomas” – John 20:19-31**

A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister  
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Loving God, we thank you for the good news of resurrection – for the new life springing up in our midst, for the renewed hope and inspiration you bring us in our times of need. May we find deep joy in this new day, as we listen for your call to each of us. Amen.

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One Sunday a pastor announced that there would be a brief meeting of the church board immediately following the worship service. After church, a new member walked into the meeting. The pastor greeted him and said, “I’m sorry, today’s meeting is just for board members.” To which the new guy replied, “well, after that sermon, I figured I was as bored as anyone else.”

I hope there will be no need for a “bored meeting” after church today!!

In the spirit of Holy Humor Sunday, today’s sermon is also a game. Sprinkled throughout my sermon are quite a few pop music song titles and lyrics (a lot of classic rock, as it turns out, but not exclusively). If you want to play along, you can keep count. You might want to grab a pen or one of the pew pencils and make tic marks on your bulletin. Afterwards, we’ll see who got it right (or at least close). This includes you who are watching the livestream, you can put your answers in the chat. And I’m really hoping you’ll play along and won’t just hand this win to Pastor Dave!

Today, we enter into the brief, but poignant, story of Thomas. He’s one of the twelve disciples. He’s listed in all four gospels. But only John pays much attention to him and only in John does he speak and interact with Jesus. We’ll get to the story we heard this morning, but first I want to backtrack a bit.

Back in chapter fourteen, the reality of Jesus’ departure was starting to set in for the disciples. And Thomas was the one who expressed the anxiety that I’m sure most of them were feeling at the time. Jesus had told them that this was the *final countdown*. But he also told them that he was going ahead to prepare a place for them. And he said, “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

But our friend *Major Tom* is the one who is honest and courageous enough to speak up in that moment and say, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” To which, Jesus responds with those well-known words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Too often throughout Christian history that line has been taken out of its context and misused as an exclusionary statement. But that misses the point. When we read the whole story, we see that it was really a word of reassurance, encouragement, and hope from Jesus to his closest friends. They were worried about what would happen next, worried about getting lost without their teacher and leader. And so, Jesus reassures them that they did know the

way and that they would continue to find their way forward. Jesus had shown them the way every day of his life.

But I don't blame Thomas one bit for asking. It's a normal human response. And so, when we are asking our own questions, when we wonder where life's path will lead us next, when we're trying to figure out the next step, we can remember that we're in good company. Jesus' first disciples had plenty of questions. It's ok to ask. It's ok to wonder. It's ok to say to God: "*help, I need somebody!*"

And in our asking, wondering, and questioning, we can come back to Jesus' words of encouragement. We can remember for ourselves that we too know the way – the way that Jesus walked – even if every step isn't always as clearly defined as a *yellow brick road*.

All along Jesus had been inviting his disciples into a way of life that would continue beyond his earthly life. He was asking them and is still asking us modern disciples, *are you gonna go my way?*

*You can go your own way.* Or, together, we can seek to embrace the way of Jesus – which is both an individual and communal path of life and spirituality – a path in which our collective journey is as important as our individual one.

A little later on in chapter fourteen Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned." And that names a big part of their fear right there, I think – the fear of being orphaned, the fear of being left on their own. And so, Jesus then speaks of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will be there to guide, to sustain, and to inspire them.

Things would change in a big way, that's true. But Jesus' message to his disciples, past and present, is, *I'll be there for you when the rain starts to pour. I'll be there for you like I've been there before.* What a friend! ☺

*Like a bridge over troubled water,* Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the illuminating and inspiring presence of God, helps us find a way forward, even in challenging circumstances.

So, now we *might as well jump* to the story we heard this morning.

It was evening on that first Easter Sunday. In John's version of the story, that morning Mary Magdalene had found the tomb empty and then encountered the Risen Christ for herself. She then went back and shared her experience with the disciples.

But it seems that they didn't believe her. Or at least weren't sure what to make of her story. You'd think they might have gone back to the tomb in hopes of seeing Jesus for themselves. Instead, we find them in a house. And they've locked the doors in fear of the imperial powers that killed Jesus, in fear of what might happen to them (which was not unreasonable). So, when Jesus shows up, he has to *break on through to the other side* to get to them.

And, when he does, his message is not “why are you hiding away in fear? Why didn’t you come looking for me?” It’s “peace be with you.” The same message of peace he has offered many times before. And he proceeds to show him his hands and his side so they might see that it is really him.

And then he commissions them – “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And he offers to them the Holy Spirit by breathing on them. That Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, he spoke of back in chapter fourteen was now theirs to guide their lives, to inspire their work, to help them continue their journey along the way that Jesus had shown them, to be the *wind beneath their wings*. In John’s gospel, Easter and Pentecost are one event.

But poor Thomas! He missed it all! He wasn’t there when Jesus showed up.

So, when he gets back and the rest of the disciples tell him, “We have seen the Lord.” Thomas is like, “*I can’t go for that; no can do... I’ve got to see for him myself.*”

And this is, of course, where “Doubting Thomas” gets his familiar nickname. But I prefer to call him honest. All of the disciples had their doubts. All of them had their fears. Had any of the rest of them been left out of this experience, I’d bet their responses would have been similar. Thomas’ reaction is honest and understandable.

So, a whole week passes by, and I can imagine that Thomas is probably feeling left out and wondering if this could possibly be true. It must have been a long week for him, thinking oh, *how I wish you were here* because I might be *losing my religion*. I feel for Thomas. And I suspect most of us can relate to his longing.

And then, once again, after this week of waiting, the Risen Christ shows up at the house. And, thank God, this time Thomas is there!

“Peace be with you” is again Jesus’ greeting. And then he turns to Thomas and shows him his hands and side. And Jesus’ message isn’t, “*you can’t touch this!*” It’s “*reach out and touch faith!*”

And, as he does, Thomas responds, “My Lord and my God!” He *can see clearly now the rain is gone*. Out of his dark night of the soul, *here comes the Sun!*

Jesus then says to him, “have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Unfortunately, this is one of those lines that has been used to judge those who have questions and doubts. But we don’t have to read it that way. We can instead read it as a word of encouragement to all who would hear and read the gospel in the generations to follow. It’s a message to all of us who never met the historical Jesus in the flesh, but who are striving to follow in his way (even when we have our own questions and doubts). It is a word of blessing to all who have not seen, but who are nevertheless trying to learn from the story of Jesus we have inherited – his teachings, his life and ministry. It’s a message intended to inspire all who have come to know and perceive the Risen Christ in our hearts, in our lives together, in various ways throughout the centuries.

It is an invitation to believe, but not out of fear or judgment. It is an invitation offered with peace and grace to believe – not just in Jesus himself, but in his mission, in his call to us, in his witness to God’s enduring grace and love. It’s an invitation to keep walking.

You *gotta have faith*, but the reality is that doubt and fear are going to be a part of the journey of faith sometimes. And that’s ok. I don’t think feeling guilty about our doubts and fears when they arise is particularly helpful. I don’t think trying to avoid all doubt and fear is particularly helpful or practical either.

Instead, we might consider how we accept our own doubts and fears. How do we sit with and work through our own doubts and fears? To whom might we share our doubts and fears, trusting in their compassionate response?

The thing is, sometimes we even meet God in new ways in our own times of doubt and fear. And, through it all, we might learn something new about faith. And our faith might actually be strengthened and deepened in the process.

I see Thomas’ story as not so much a warning against doubt, as an illustration of how God responds to us in our doubt. Jesus’ message to Thomas is not one of judgment and condemnation. It’s one of peace and grace. *Tommy, can you hear me? Can you feel me near you? Tommy, can you see me? Can I help to cheer you?* The Risen Christ brings an invitation to perceive, to feel, to connect, to know deep and abiding love.

Early Christians imagined an ending to Thomas’ story. And no, our Tommy didn’t become a *pinball wizard*. There is, however, an apocryphal story that Thomas became a missionary to India where he performed many miracles, spread the gospel, and was ultimately martyred.

Though perhaps not based in any historical evidence, this story tells me that early Christians affirmed that Thomas’ journey of faith through doubt led him onward to follow his own calling as an apostle.

And so, like Thomas, perhaps as we move through our times of fear and doubt, we too can hold fast to our calling to be disciples of the Way of Jesus and apostles for the deep and abiding peace and grace of God.

Even when you have a hard time finding the next step, *don’t stop believing, just hold on to that feeling*.

And when that self-critical, self-judging voice comes *in like a wrecking ball*, just *shake it off*.

Because God’s *never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna run around and desert you*.

Amen.