

April 18, 2021

“Blessed Are Those Who Believe”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 20:24-29

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How many of you have heard of, or remember the name, Vasco de Gama? Some of you I'm sure, but perhaps for the rest of you, a little ancient world history is in order – specifically about trade routes. Literally, for thousands of years, the only way that silk cloth, spices, tea and other exotic items from Asia could reach the Middle East and Europe was via a land route that was called The Silk Road. As you could imagine, the transport of these items over the land took months and even years. So the hope was always to find a sea route between Europe and Asia. That was impossible for hundreds of years since there was no accurate map of the world, and there were also no ships capable of making long ocean going journeys. That is, until the late 15th century. That's when the Portuguese explorer Vasco do Gama and his squadron of four ships with a crew of 170 men finally rounded the southern tip of Africa and made their way to India. And besides the many, many riches they were looking for, guess what else they found there? They found... Christians. Yes, surprisingly, Christianity was already alive and firmly established in India. Now how did these Christians get there? Well, it was because of that person we just heard about in today's Scripture lesson. Thomas, also called 'the twin,' who set off on a missionary expedition to the Asian subcontinent way back in the first century, and told the people there the good news of the risen Christ.

So given that, I think the disciple Thomas has gotten pretty bad rap over the years. Because we've coined a rather disparaging term that now describes him, referring to him as “Doubting Thomas.” And we shake our heads as though he is the only person to have ever doubted when it comes to belief in God. But the truth is, we have all doubted in one way or another, haven't we? Yes, there's doubting Rebecca... doubting Ted... doubting Diane... doubting Larry. Perhaps, then, it might be a good idea to give Thomas a break. After all, who are we to second guess him after what happened during those fateful days in Jerusalem. I'm sure he had to have watched, even from a distance, his Master being beaten, spat upon and crucified. Then he had to deal with the aftermath of Jesus' death: seeing the battered body, wondering where he would be buried. And then of course, the news that Jesus' body had disappeared from the grave. So he, like the others, probably thought it a smart idea to lay low, huddle together for a few days in a locked room, away from the authorities, for fear they might become the next victims. And, of course, that's exactly what Thomas and the disciples did. Except, for some reason, Thomas was out of this room when Jesus made his first appearance. So when Thomas came back, the other disciples told him they had seen the risen Lord. And Thomas responded with those infamous

words. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” “I will not believe.”

Now that obviously sounds stubborn and even somewhat blasphemous, but in all honesty, Thomas is being asked to believe what most people would consider unbelievable. Fortunately though, there is a second encounter. A week later Jesus appears again – he came and stood among them. And he says 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.” And suddenly, Thomas gets it. He realizes just who Jesus is, and his response is one of the strongest statements of Jesus’ deity in the New Testament, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus gently chides him, and, I might add, us as well, “You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

Now just as an aside, I find it interesting that it is within a community of other believers that Thomas recognizes Christ at a level that eluded him beforehand. You see, he was in the upper room with the other disciples, those other believers. I think that's important because when we look at all the dysfunction and division that exists in the world today, perhaps it is only through a community of believers that God stands any chance to transform the world. A community of faith that upholds moral and ethical values and behavior, that promotes peace and stands against conflict, that advocates for justice and human rights. That's why I believe St. Paul's words in his letter to the Romans become even more essential for us to hear and act upon. “For how are they – the world out there – to call on him if they have not put their trust in him? And how can they put their trust in him if they have not heard of him? And how can they hear of him, unless someone tells them?” Yes, like Jesus told us, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

But now let's get back to Thomas and his initial doubt. Because it begs the question, “What is the basic root of his unbelief in the first place? Was it really that he needed hard evidence? After all he had witnessed Jesus’ miracles. He was there when Jesus turned water into wine, he was there when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He had seen Jesus still the storm and calm the seas. And he had observed all the lives that Jesus changed. So what was it? Well, I think Thomas experienced something that we all go through from time to time. You see – we all know that there is an ebb and flow to this earthly life. There are days of joy and then there are days of sadness. There are days of excitement and then there are days of routine without purpose. There are days of belief and then there are days of doubt. As

we go through life, these various experiences shape our thoughts and feelings and belief in God. Experiences where we hear and meet and touch God, or... we feel his absence. And that's what I think was happening to Thomas. He was experiencing God's absence. I'm sure this has happened to all of us – times when we feel that God has left us, abandoned us. But that's why the message of today's gospel is so important. The message to hold on, to believe, to have faith. Because if we missed Jesus on the first visit, as Thomas did, we can be assured there will be another encounter. Jesus came again and stood among them. Jesus will never leave or abandon us. He will make his presence known to us again, and again, and again. So that we too can finally have the faith to know him as 'My Lord and My God.'

Theologian Paul Tillich said that "faith" is the most misunderstood word in the religious vocabulary. And this is a tragedy, for faith stands at the very heart of our Christianity. The opening line of Hebrews chapter 11 has the correct definition: "Faith is confident assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things we do not see." Notice that the unknown author uses the terms faith and hope together. And in St. Paul's "love" chapter from 1 Corinthians, he expands this further and creates a trinity of virtues. Faith, hope, and love! So consider what this means for us. We Christians are not meant to live by our earthly experiences alone, those ebbs and flows. We are to temper our experiences with faith – divine hope and expectation. That is why we are not to despair in the face of all the anxiety and hypocrisy around us. We are to have confident assurance in this life because the risen Christ is among us. Christian faith and hope is based on the assurance that the God who formed us out of his love, and came among us as one of us, will never abandon us. Never. Never!

I want to close with one final comment regarding today's Scripture lesson. As I mentioned earlier, Thomas was also called the "Twin." That this detail has been preserved in biblical tradition may mean that he was an actual twin, or perhaps, it was a play on words between Thomas the doubter, and Thomas the believer. And so, perhaps in this regard, we are all twins. Christians who struggle in our journey between doubt and faith. But crossing that threshold is more than just an intellectual feat. Another Thomas, the great church father Thomas Aquinas, described the pursuit of God as 'faith seeking understanding, rather than understanding seeking faith.' You see, he argued that the gift of faith comes first, because no amount of reasoning can reveal the mystery that is meant to guide us through this life, and into the kingdom of heaven.¹ Yes, the risen Christ, is among us. Do you believe? "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Amen.

¹ Doubting Thomas, Catholic Reporter July, 2020