

Easter 2

Message: Conditional Thomas

"See, Thomas? Why can't you believe? Don't you see?"

Sometimes we want to jump onto the pages of our gospel story, grab the characters by shoulders and just shake them! Come on, Thomas!

But before we wag our superior faithful finger at Thomas, we need to recognize that he is no different than the other disciples were, and no different than you and I!

Let's look at the actions of all the rest of the disciples:

In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus in the Garden, hot on the heels of his recent resurrection. So close, in fact that Jesus seems to caution her about touching him, at least not just yet. He sends her to the rest of the disciples with a **message**: verse 18 of this same chapter: Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and **she told them** that he had said these things to her.

The very next verse begins our gospel lesson for this morning – and what do we find? "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...". In spite of the Word that Mary brought to them, they obviously didn't trust or believe it!

So what happens next? "Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. **Then** the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord" (!)

These disciples did nothing that Thomas didn't do! Their rejoicing came only after Jesus showing them his hands and side. They did not trust the word that Mary had proclaimed to them any more than Thomas trusted theirs! And you and I are the same! We always want something more than God's Word in Christ Jesus! We want signs and wonders, miracles and marvels.

The gospel story this morning is a great example of the challenges that face language translators and the readers of the translations. All too often, a word or phrase in one language exists for which there is no simple, concise corresponding word or phrase in the other language. Translators are faced with the dilemma of either going with something that's close and risk missing some of the nuances, or striving for accuracy and losing the reader in the resulting complicated wordiness.

Case in point: down thru the years we have grown accustomed to hearing about "doubting Thomas" and our perception of him has been shaped by our own grammar. Thomas becomes one more example of who we are supposed to try to not be like!

But there are subtle, intriguing things happening here! First, let's consider the actual definition of our English word *doubt*. I looked up the word doubt in my great big, honkin' Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (all 1854 pages of it!) and found this definition: "To be uncertain; to hesitate, to waiver". Does that sound like Thomas to you? Not to me! How did Thomas put it? "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." That sounds pretty certain to me! There's no hesitancy, no wavering! Thomas responds, not with doubt, but with definite, crystal clear, emphatic conditions for believing!

Thomas adamantly declares that **if** the conditions ***he establishes*** are not met, then he will definitely **not believe**.

Rather than "doubting Thomas," the text presents "conditional Thomas." And it is precisely at this moment of discovery that we find our true selves as well.

How often do we approach our faith relationship as a legal contract in which **we** seek to establish the terms by which we will respond with faith?

- "If I have historical proof...
- If I have a sign...
- If near-death experiences can verify...
- If God would do...
- If Jesus would cure...
- Then I will believe in Christ...
- Then I will know that God exists...
- Then I will know that there is life after death...
- Then I will make a commitment of faith."

We replicate the folly of "conditional Thomas" each time we establish for Christ the criteria for how Christ needs to operate in our lives and each time we seek to ground our faith in what **we** demand from God, rather than in what **God** does in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus and Thomas finally have their face-to-face meeting, something spectacular happens, but it might not be what you think! Jesus' message to Thomas was not a word of admonition or scolding, or even encouragement.

Jesus was not saying, "Come on, now, Thomas! You better stop that doubting nonsense! You need to start believing! You need to do better – you need to try a little harder!"

When Jesus said to Thomas, "Do not be unbelieving – be believing!", he was speaking a command. It was the same commanding verb tense he used when he commanded the sea to be calm – and it was so, when he commanded demons to depart from Mary – and it was so, when he commanded a fig tree to wither – and it was so; when he commanded, "let there be light" – and it was so!

He was speaking into Thomas the belief that Thomas needed! He speaks the proper response **into** Thomas so that Thomas responds with the ultimate relational confession of faith, "My Lord and my God." As our Lutheran confessions state: "The Holy Spirit creates faith where and when he wishes in those who hear the gospel." He said, "Be believing!" – and it was so!

God's Word accomplishes the purpose for which it is spoken or given. Isaiah 55:11 55:11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

The story of Thomas is not intended to be a word of encouragement for you and me to not be like Thomas and just try harder! Luther correctly says that I believe that by my own power or understanding I cannot believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to him." I believe that I cannot believe! Even if I wanted to, I cannot!

No, the Word of God to you and me this morning is the good news, the promise that faith and belief do not come from what we see! Faith does not come from believing what we see. The scriptures tell us that faith comes from hearing the Word of God in Christ Jesus.

From the way John opened his gospel – with the poetry that takes us as readers back to the "big bang" of the creation of the universe, up to this final intimate moment of comfort and assurance, John wants us to know that we did not have to be there in person. We did not have to walk the paths with Jesus. We did not have to see the miracles first hand. We did not have to be locked in that upper room. Through the reading of John's message we may hear the stories and come to believe. And, in believing, we may have life eternal.

Thanks be to God!