

## **Second Sunday of Easter – ‘Doubting Thomas Sunday’**

**April 19, 2020**

### **A Word about Holy Communion**

As I think about the gathering of the disciples in today’s Gospel, I am saddened that we cannot gather in our respective sanctuaries to hear the Word of God and celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. You are undoubtedly hearing discussions about ‘*virtual communion*’ or ‘*internet communion.*’ This is not our practice and is not authorized by the Lutheran Confessions or our bishops. While do not commune together in the same geographic spot, we are reminded that our Lord Jesus is fully present to us in the Word of God even when we are not celebrating the Lord’s Supper. He is present to us, just as he was present to the first disciples eight days after his resurrection.

### **Introduction**

In today’s Gospel from St John, we hear the story of Jesus’ appearance on Easter evening to the disciples. However, Thomas was not present. When told of their experience, he cannot believe their words. Eight days later, the Resurrected Lord appeared again, but this time Thomas was present. Today’s homily will explore the line between faith and doubt. How can we believe when so much has gone wrong? . . . Especially during this time of quarantine because of the corona virus.

The good news on this Second Sunday of Easter is that Jesus did come to the disciples in their distress – including Thomas who had difficulty believing their reports. Faith in the Resurrected Jesus came in a different way to Thomas. He just wanted what the others had . . . *He wanted to see Jesus.* For his honesty, for his willingness to ask questions, Thomas will forever be known as ‘the doubter.’ Encountering Jesus, Thomas said, ‘My Lord and my God!’ So let it be for us as we experience today’s Gospel.

### **Gospel: John 20.19-31**

<sup>19</sup>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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." 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."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."  
<sup>27</sup>Then he said 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." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

### ***'The Impossibility of Subtracting 6 from 4'***

**Let us pray.** Almighty God, on the first Easter you opened the grave and brought life to Jesus, and to all who believe in him. But Lord, our faith is weak. We are caught up in our own sinfulness, and we cannot see the gift of life that you hold out to us. Forgive our unbelief, dear Father, and open our hearts to the One who died and now lives. Give our troubled hearts peace, and nurture our faith so that we too might confess Jesus as our 'Lord and God,' and join him in his resurrection. In his saving name we pray, amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

My favorite comic strip is 'Peanuts' by Minnesota's own Charles Schulz. Schulz's gift was that he could use humor to make us look more critically at our lives. It's not unusual for us to see a bit of ourselves in Charlie Brown, Lucy, and Linus. Several days ago, on the internet, I found a 'Peanuts' strip that had been published many years ago on a Sunday morning. It struck me because it reminded me of Thomas' struggle to believe the disciples; story that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead.

Linus came up to Lucy with pencil and paper in hand and asked, 'How much is six from four?' Well, you know Lucy. Incredulous that anyone could ask a question like that, she looked up from her book and said sarcastically, 'Six from four? You can't subtract six from four!' Then returning to her book, she continues, 'Everybody knows that you can't subtract a bigger number from a smaller number.' Linus, standing there patiently during her lecture on mathematics, exclaims with frustration, 'Yes you can, if you're stupid.' The ultimate self-putdown.

Perhaps, both Lucy and Linus will someday learn enough mathematics to understand positive and negative numbers. Or better yet, with a little experience, they will learn that as one takes two steps forward, they can also take three steps backward, and wind up behind their original starting point. In each case, something is understood, and there is an awareness of something real . . . Something learned by experience.

I wonder then, if Linus is really stupid. In the context of the Sunday comics, he is confronted with something that just doesn't make any sense. 'How much is six from four?' At his young age, poor Linus wasn't prepared for the complexity and beauty of higher mathematics. Linus was frustrated, not because he was stupid, but because he didn't have the knowledge or experience to understand.

In today's Gospel, Linus could well be Thomas, or anyone else who was not there when the once dead, but now living Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter. I wonder if Thomas was really a doubter of the resurrection. Perhaps poor Thomas just wasn't prepared for the complexity and beauty of encountering the risen Jesus. Thomas was frustrated, not because he was stupid, but because he didn't have the knowledge or the experience to understand. Let's examine the story.

It was Easter evening and the disciples were in hiding. They hid for fear of what might happen to them. To make matters worse, Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and could not find the body of Jesus. Their report troubled the disciples. But that was not all; Mary insisted that she had encountered the living Jesus outside the tomb. Her words were burned into their memories. She said, 'I have seen the Lord!' It was no wonder that they were afraid. What could such a story possibly mean? **Common sense says** that you can't take a bigger number away from a small number . . . **Common sense says** that death is the end of life . . . **And common sense says** that the dead stay dead.

Our bond with the first disciples is simple. Today, our Lord finds us locked away from the world. We've heard stories about his resurrection, and we whisper them to each other in our homes. Like the disciples, we huddle together to talk about what might have happened on that first Easter. In a world that is skeptical and doesn't know what to believe I wonder if we're a bit embarrassed by the whole story . . . We might even be afraid of what friends and family might think if we talk about our beliefs too loudly. **And we call Thomas a doubter!** What can such a story possibly mean for us today? **Common sense says** that you can't take a bigger number away from a small number . . . **Common sense says** that death is the end of life.

Then suddenly, the Lord Jesus Christ stood among his disciples; the same way he now stands among us in our isolation. He is neither apparition nor hallucination; he is the resurrected Lord of the Church. To those whom he loves, his greeting is always the same: '**PEACE BE WITH YOU.**' They are words that give comfort to troubled hearts.

Then Jesus breathes his life-giving Spirit into his disciples, past and present. And in so doing, he commissions us to take up his ministry among our brothers and sisters. As the Lord of the Church, he does not allow us to hide from the world in our beautiful sanctuaries, just talking about the resurrection. Instead, Jesus sends us out into the world

with his Holy Spirit to live the resurrection. Understand that Jesus is not saying that all of us are to be preachers. What he is saying is that we are commissioned to give witness, in word and deed, to the power of the Gospel in our lives even as we shelter in place. Now this is all well and good. These words may be fine for those who have never struggled with their faith, but what about the Thomases of the world? What about those who want to take six away from four? What about those who are troubled by the resurrection of Jesus?

**Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared to the disciples.** They believed; but he needed more than just the word of others. Thomas wanted to be certain before he committed himself to something he didn't understand. 'Unless I see in his hands the prints of the nails and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

You have to admire Thomas. He is a practical man; one who trusts his senses. For him, seeing is believing. Unfortunately, he knows little of human perversity. One could almost make it a rule of human behavior. **No matter what the sign is, our skepticism will always grow to overcome the proof that is presented.** Human beings can never know anything for certain.

On this Second Sunday of Easter, Jesus has all types of disciples here at Bethel and Immanuel Lutheran Churches. And, rest assured, he loves us all. Some of us are like those who saw Jesus on Easter evening and believed. **They are blessed** because their faith is secure. **They are blessed** because they have his peace. **And they are blessed** because they have found Jesus within the Church; precisely where they have been born and raised. They know that he has always been there for them.

**But Thomas is another story.** He is the person who was not there when the miracle happened. He is the person who heard the story from someone else. Some of us are 'Thomases' and we are skeptical of what other people tell us. We do not recognize the Risen Lord because we stand on the fringe of faith. We question because we have not seen with our own eyes. We are Christmas and Easter Christians who listen to the story hoping to feel better about ourselves. We are Sunday Christians who come out of duty, hoping that Jesus will make himself known. We Thomases sense the absence of Christ in our lives as profoundly as some sense his presence. We know about betrayals of faith and we dare not believe only to be disappointed again. Like Thomas, we want certainty.

The good news this morning is that Jesus did come to Thomas amidst the community of faith. He came with the words, **'PEACE BE WITH YOU.'** But when Jesus offered proof, Thomas realized its worthlessness. Seeing and touching are not enough; they will not, and cannot, bring faith. Faith came to Thomas as he experienced the Living Christ.

Perhaps in some ways, it's easier for us to believe than it was for Thomas. We don't have the evidence of our senses to confuse us. Seeing is not believing . . . **Seeing is seeing, and nothing more.** But faith comes as we experience the living Christ. Today, Jesus also stands

among us. Just as Linus will learn in time that it is possible to take six away from four; we too will learn that Jesus is alive for us. **But proof-seekers beware!** Thomas got more than he bargained for. Jesus took him seriously and gave him all the proof he needed. So, in the end, it all comes down to this: *What if the resurrected Jesus takes our doubt seriously, like he did that of Thomas?* He might just give us the proof that we need. **Then what will we say?** It is my hope that we can join Thomas and say, **'My Lord and my God.'** To say anything more is to say too little. Amen.