



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 28, 2019

“God’s Faithfulness to the Faithless”

(John 20:25)

Rev. David K. Groth

“But Thomas said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe’ (John 20:25).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, grant that we have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It's the evening of that first Easter Sunday. The disciples are just trying to survive. They've gone into hiding, fearful the same folks who engineered Jesus' arrest and execution might now turn their attention on them, his followers. So the doors are locked for fear of the Jews. Suddenly Jesus appears among them. "Peace be with you" he says to them. Two times he says it. That is, this isn't so much a greeting as it is an absolution. He shows them his wounds, the evidence that he's earned this reconciliation with God and has this peace to give. He's forgiving them . . . for everything, for their cowardice, their abandonment of him, their faithlessness. He's washed it all away. Their sin is now as far away as the east is from the west.

Next, he makes his disciples, (the church) the custodians of this forgiveness. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit and said, "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness, it is withheld." It was all so quick and startling and confusing and wonderful and shocking. And, just like that, it's over. Jesus has disappeared again.

Of course, Thomas wasn't there to see it. Maybe he was using the cover of darkness to stretch his legs. When he returns the disciples tell him what happened, but Thomas doesn't believe a word of it. "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Thomas wants some hard evidence, needs some proof if he is to believe it. Trouble is, then it wouldn't be faith. It'd just be acknowledging what can no longer be denied.

Many of us can identify with Thomas. He's perhaps the most memorable of all the post-Easter characters because we see in Thomas's doubting heart our own doubting hearts. If you look hard enough, I suspect you'll find patches of obstinate unbelief within your own faith. Maybe the fabric of your faith

is not riddled with holes, but here and there the fabric can get pretty thin. I think Thomas speaks aloud the questions and doubts and unbeliefs that lurk within each of us. We understand Thomas. We know him. We recognize him.

I'm so glad Thomas is a part of this post-Easter history because if the disciples had never doubted, I for one would have a hard time thinking of them as real people. They'd be plaster saints, super heroes of the faith with whom I cannot relate. I'm so glad Thomas is a part of this account, because without him, we might grow discouraged and disheartened by our own awful faith. If those first disciples had perfect faith, I would surely conclude that mine, by comparison, must be a phony, a fraud and a fake. I might talk myself out of faith altogether.

We need Thomas and his doubt and disbelief, for then we also get to see the Lord's patience with Thomas, and the Lord's love for him, and forgiveness and generosity. If the Lord still loves Thomas, maybe he can love us too. If the Lord can still use Thomas in the Kingdom of God, maybe he can also use you and me.

Have you ever noticed how Jesus is often surrounded by people with awful faith? Have you ever noticed how patient he is with them, and loving and gracious?

I'm thinking of those two criminals who were crucified with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. In the beginning of the crucifixion account, there's nothing to distinguish one from the other. Both were criminals. Both were helpless. Both were dying. And, to begin with, both of them ridiculed Jesus. Matthew 27, "the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him" (v. 44). Mark's Gospel agrees. They joined with the chief priests, the scribes and even those who were just passing by, and hurled insults at Jesus, dumping their hatred on him.

But as the hours go by, something changes in one of them. One of them isn't yelling at Jesus anymore. He has grown quiet. And as the other criminal starts taunting Jesus again, the quiet one breaks his silence. "Don't you fear God? We are receiving the due reward for our deeds, but

this man has done nothing wrong.” Then to his Lord he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Clearly, something has changed within that man. Clearly, the Holy Spirit has worked faith in this man.

But what kind of faith could it have been? Think about it: there was no opportunity for baptism, no opportunity for instruction, for catechesis, no opportunity to devote himself to the teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

What kind of faith could it have been? This was likely his only encounter with Jesus, and the sight of Jesus was hardly one to inspire confidence. Assuming the criminal was able to turn his head toward Jesus, he would have seen a wreck of a man, bloodied all over, bruised and beaten, maybe an eye swollen shut, and his flesh deeply lacerated from the flogging, the crown of thorns, and the shame of having no clothing. Maybe a loin cloth; maybe not. But somehow, the Holy Spirit worked faith in the man, and he expresses a simple trust in Jesus. “Jesus, remember me.” Don’t remember my sin; remember me when you come into your kingdom. And for his part, Jesus does not hold a grudge against the man for his former mockery. He does not give him a cold shoulder, or the silent treatment. Jesus cannot not resist the voice of anyone who is penitent and trusting. “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk.23:43). It couldn’t have been much of a faith, but whatever it was, it was enough. That makes me hopeful for you, for me, for those we love.

Jesus was often surrounded by people with less than perfect faith. I’m thinking of the man whose son was often thrown into convulsions. He begged Jesus, “‘If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.’ ‘If you can?’ Jesus replied. ‘Everything is possible for him who believes.’ Immediately the boy’s father responds, ‘I believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’” That’s probably where most of us are, suspended somewhere between the two poles of faith and unbelief. Faith is never perfect in any of us, and it certainly wasn’t perfect in this man either. He doesn’t enjoy

intellectual certainty and he knows he has patches of unbelief. But he comes before Jesus with whatever faith he has, and it is enough. Jesus takes the boy by the hand, lifts him up and heals him (Mk. 9:14ff). It makes me hopeful.

Jesus isn't looking to condemn anyone. His aim is to save. Therefore he will stretch his promises to the breaking point. Fools and fanatics are always so certain of what they know, but the rest of us struggle with doubt. I no longer think of doubt and disbelief as faith's opposites, but as faith's companions along the way.

It makes me think of God's ancient people, out there in the wilderness. We read of their wickedness and their terrible faith, always testing him, always demanding proof that he was still with them and would do what he promised for them. As with Thomas, so also with them: God's Word was never enough. Their awful faith would frustrate God to the point where he wants to forget about them. He wants to turn his back on those disbelieving people, and let them be wiped from the face of the earth. But he remembers his promises and chooses to forget their sin. Through it all, he keeps calling these people with terrible faith: "my people." That little word my makes me hopeful. My people. My church. My sheep.

And now I'm thinking of some of the kids I've confirmed over the years. Some come to us with little or no religious instruction given at home; little or no exposure to God's Word in Sunday School and VBS; little or no time spent in worship, not even here for Easter. So they just kind of appear on the scene one day, looking resentful that mom and dad are doing this to them. We get them for an hour of instruction once a week. Social media, Netflix and Fort Night gets them for the rest of the week. What kind of faith can it be?

We try so hard to teach them the faith in ways that will stick, to be winsome about it. We do our best, but it can be so discouraging. During the elder examination, the elders can figure out pretty quickly when it's appropriate to lob nothing but soft balls right into the strike zone. And there's

lots of erratic swinging at the plate. Once in a while the bat will nick the ball, and the elders will declare it a home-run, sort of like how God declares us righteous, though we're not. The elders take their cue from Jesus, who's not out there to get anyone or embarrass anyone or flunk anyone. They take their cue from Jesus who was/is patient and gentle with those of little faith. They take their cue from Jesus who looks for a way to reward those with little faith. It's good to remember faith isn't just an intellectual exercise where we are able to articulate a long list of doctrines. Faith is more about trusting in Jesus above all things. Remember what Jesus said about the very small children? Quote: they "believe in me." "The kingdom of God belongs to them." It makes me hopeful.

God's people have always had imperfect faith, and God has always loved his people nonetheless. So when Jesus hears Thomas ranting about the need for cold, hard evidence, it doesn't shock Jesus, or render him speechless. It doesn't incense him. When Jesus returns, this time with Thomas in the room, the very first thing Jesus says is "Peace be with you." There's that absolution again. Then, to Thomas specifically, "Put your finger here. See my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." I don't hear anger in these words . . . maybe sadness and disappointment, but not anger. Clearly, he's not abandoning Thomas either. He's not given up on Thomas. God has a heart also for those with weak faith. "A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will never snuff out."

Sometimes our faith teeters on the brink; it sits on the fulcrum and sways back and forth, on some days toward a strong and sturdy faith; other days toward bleak unbelief. But God isn't content to passively watch this drama play itself out. No, I see his finger coming down from above and tipping the balance. After all, his aim is to save, not to condemn. Hebrews 12 says he is the author of our faith, and faith's perfecter too (v.2). In Philippians 1 Paul writes, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you [that

being your faith and your salvation] . . . he who began this good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (v. 6).

I’m so glad this passage about Thomas is part of the Easter story, because he sounds very much like a real person with real doubt and unbelief. I recognize Thomas in myself and others. But this passage also shows us the patience of Jesus, his forgiveness, his love, and most of all his faithfulness even to the faithless (2 Tim. 2:13). Thanks be to God! Amen.

