



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“Beyond the Tomb of Doubt”

Scripture Lessons: *Judges 6:36-40; John 20:19-31*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.
on April 7, 2024, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Judges 6:36-40

The Sign of the Fleece

³⁶ Then Gideon said to God, “In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷ I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.” ³⁸ And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, “Do not let your anger burn against me, but let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.” ⁴⁰ And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

John 20:19-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Jesus and Thomas

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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.”

²⁶ 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." ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ 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."

The Purpose of This Book

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Beyond the Tomb of Doubt

There sometimes exists a tension between faith and doubt. Oh, we are happy to demonstrate our faith; but, more often than not, we are a bit resistant to reveal our doubt.

But doubt is real! It can rear its ugly head upon the passing of a loved one ... or that depression / the obsession / the addiction – the one that you can't seem to shake ... and such things can cause us to doubt the goodness of God or to doubt God's presence and God's providence.

Doubt can feel like the absence of faith. But are faith and doubt mutually exclusive? Tennyson didn't think so! He once said that "more real faith lives in honest doubt than in half our creeds."

Still, we have a tendency to put up a front that everything is fine ... like a Facebook profile that reveals hardly anything of who we really are. We post the lovely / the stable / the secure, but we keep hidden the struggle ... the doubt.

I was recently talking with a colleague about an ongoing pastoral search, and I was differentiating between the poster and the pastor ... the poster being what people expect to see – maybe it's a pastoral pedigree / a degree from Davidson / a bowtie perhaps ... but then there's the pastor / that perfectly human disciple who is called to serve.

The original disciples, they too knew about faith! They had seen the blind receive their sight / witnessed the lame walk ... had seen Jesus himself walk on water!

There was tremendous faith around who Jesus was and what he was doing throughout his life! There was great joy and anticipation ... and there were affirmations of faith!

"When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say

that the Son of Man is?’

And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’”

On another occasion upon hearing that his friend Lazarus was ill, Jesus said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”

The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”

Jesus went on to say, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”

The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.”

Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him/with Jesus.”

Thomas, Peter – they all had faith in Jesus. (PAUSE)

Those 12 disciples – they, along with the women who were close to Jesus, who loved him and helped support him fund his ministry – they had each altered their lives to follow Jesus and did so for approximately three years.

Throughout their time together, Jesus told them a great many things. He had told them about Pentecost, and about how, at that time, the Holy Spirit would come. He told them about the peace that he would give to them.

“Peace I leave with you,” Jesus said, “My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Some of those things Jesus talked about had happened ... and some of them were a state of happening ... and some of them would happen in the future.

To be certain, Jesus’ death had happened! And his resurrection had happened! And that’s where our lectionary reading picks up this morning ... on Sunday night.

On that evening, nearly all the disciples had gathered in a room behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, though, at least one of them is missing ... Thomas!

If you came for our Maundy Thursday dramatization of Leonardo DaVinci's, "The Last Supper," L.W. McAnally was assigned the character of Thomas, and I know that he was contemplating writing a different script than the one he had been given, probably due to the fact that Thomas is a more complicated character than the one we so quickly refer to as "Doubting Thomas."

Ah, there's much more to him than that! Granted, part of Thomas' appeal is, in fact, that he is so human! He's not that a posterchild of faith ... he's a real person – frail and vulnerable – and susceptible to doubt.

But he was also the one who at the time of Lazarus's first death, and when Jesus and the disciples were headed into hostile territory – only Thomas had courage enough to say, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

...And why wasn't he with the disciples that evening? We know that they were all afraid. Was he out running errands? Getting some food? Communicating with other followers of Jesus? ... Was he perhaps afraid?

We don't know. What we do know is that he wasn't there, and so he didn't get to see what the other disciples saw ... a walking / talking, living / breathing ... resurrected Jesus!

Imagine them saying, "Thomas, you just missed him. Jesus, who was dead, has come back to life. We saw him and he talked with us!

And the peace he promised he would give ... he spoke it to us twice, saying "Peace be with you." Oh, he showed us his hands and his side!

And he breathed on us! Thomas, remember how he said the Holy Spirit would come upon us. It was as if he was showing us how the Spirit of God would proceed from him / that it would be like the air we breathe. Jesus, exhaling, and us, inhaling.

Well, Thomas didn't believe it! And who's to say that some of the other disciples, had they not had the benefit of seeing Jesus with their own eyes, who's to say they wouldn't have responded in the same way? Would not many of us here have responded in the same way?

Thomas' exact words are these ... "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."

Oh, he may have wanted to believe, but Thomas was also brokenhearted, because he had seen Jesus die ... and everything in his experience told him that death had the last word, that it was, as Jesus had said on the cross, “finished!”

Thomas is not so unlike us ... our life experiences tell us certain things and we rely on our senses, and when something comes along and doesn't fit into the natural order of things, it's not just hard to believe ... it's nearly unbelievable.

Still, I wonder if the disciples were not more like Thomas than we realize. I mean, a week later, when Jesus returns ... he doesn't find the disciples in the synagogue. He doesn't find them in the marketplace. It certainly doesn't seem like he finds them with the courageous and risk-taking spirit that they would all come to be known by. No! He finds them, all of them, once again, in the house – and, once again, the doors are shut!

But this time Thomas is there! And before he can say a word, Jesus says, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.”

It is interesting what's missing from this story. What's missing is any indication that Thomas actually did it! He may have assessed Jesus' wounds, his scars, but there's no record of it! All we are told is that after Jesus speaks, Thomas answered him and he answered with the affirmation that has been the church's affirmation ever since ... “My Lord and my God!”

People had called him Rabbi! Teacher! “Some called him John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Peter had called him the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, but no one had yet called him “Lord” and “God!” Only Thomas ... only doubting Thomas!

Thomas' affirmation of “My Lord and my God!” meets with Jesus' blessing, his favor! And so it is for all those who can risk and trust ... and who don't have to set out the fleece and have God prove it, those who don't need evidence, those who have not seen and yet have come to believe, blessed are they!

Doubt was a part of Thomas' journey of faith. To be certain, doubt, it is a part of every journey of faith, but when it dominates who we are, it can be like a tomb ... a tomb that holds us back and prevents us from venturing forth into the light of God's new day. It keeps us from reaching our potential!

Friends, if the resurrection has shown us anything, it has shown us that doubt, like death, is meant to be overcome! It is something from which Jesus intends to liberate us ... one day, finally and fully.

In the meantime, we have been given examples like Thomas, that by God's grace, should serve to inspire within us “faith” that is not so coincidentally described for us in the Book of Hebrews as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Oh, but in some sense, we have seen them, haven't we? Oh, we may not have seen the wounds of Jesus up close and personal like Thomas, but when we read from John's Gospel this morning, and by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit ... we have seen them!

At the end of our reading from John's Gospel, the very Beloved Disciple, he puts it like this:
"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him you may have life in his name."

Indeed, for trusting in the good news of the Gospel ... for believing where we have not seen ... we are blessed! Blessed with life! Blessed with life abundant!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.