

**Doubt Increases Faith**  
**Sunday April 11, 2010**  
**John 20:19 - 31**

**Jesus Appears to His Disciples**

<sup>19</sup>On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors 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 side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup>Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." <sup>22</sup>And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

**Jesus Appears to Thomas**

<sup>24</sup>Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples 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 nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

<sup>28</sup>Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup>Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

<sup>30</sup>Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

**This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God**

*Let Us Pray*

Dear Lord, thank you for giving us the freedom to ask the hard questions. Help us with our doubts. Help us to be honest with ourselves so that we might know the source of our doubts. Lord, we are here because we believe. Even in our doubting we want to believe. Give us the courage to ask the right questions and more importantly to accept your answers, as disillusioning as they may be. Lord, confront those smokescreens we put up because we don't really want to change. Lord, give us each the courage to seek you in the sources you have already given us, your Word, the Bible. Lord, help us also to lean on helpful experts who can lead us to some answers. Lord, I ask you to dispel any casualness toward you. Give us a passion and a yearning and drive within us to seek you and find you and to draw nearer to you. We want to be "forceful men and women" who lay hold of your kingdom in all its fullness. Thank you for making your kingdom available to us through Jesus Christ. It is in His Name, I pray. Amen.

Last week the Reverend Linda Veltheim brought our Easter message and read to us about Mary's encounter with the risen Christ. How Mary had confronted the *gardener* at the empty tomb concerning the whereabouts of Jesus' body. After a moment of discussion, the *gardener* called Mary by name and instantly she realized that it was her teacher and friend, Jesus, which stood before her. *Rabboni*, she cried, which is translated as, "My Teacher." In an instant, at the sound of her name, all the worries of the world and the tears that distracted her from recognizing her Jesus were swept away. Jesus had called her by name and Mary responded.

Then there is Peter and John. They had rushed to the tomb when Mary had told them that it was empty. Equally alarmed that someone had taken away the body of the teacher, they wasted no time in seeing for themselves that what Mary had told them was true. But when Mary later tells them of her encounter with the risen Christ, they do not seek. There seems to be an

abundance of time and a lack of urgency. Why is that? Why didn't they go looking for him? Why an apparent grave robbery was seemingly more intriguing than an apparent resurrection from the grave is beyond me. Hadn't Jesus taken the time to teach them about and prepare them for this event?

These are difficult questions to answer. Today's scripture reading tells us that the Disciples were huddled together behind locked doors. The door was locked. Why would the Disciples be hidden away from the world behind locked doors? Perhaps a stolen body would have been a little easier to digest than a resurrected Christ. At least with a stolen body, there was still affirmation in the finality of death. But a risen Jesus would call for some alarm. The disciples knew that it was entirely possible. They had, after all, seen Lazarus resurrected so to conceive that Jesus himself had defeated death was not outside of their understanding. If Jesus was back from the dead, then I imagine the disciples believed that they were in for it.

Could it have been that they were afraid of running into Jesus himself? Certainly Peter would have had reason to be afraid to run into Jesus. The last time Peter had spoken to Jesus, his words had been full of confidence. But then some hours later a rooster crowed and Peter seriously considered following Judas down a path of destruction. It wasn't just Peter who had denied their Christ and fled, but all of the other disciples had fled Gethsemane; frightened like sheep in a storm.

Yet all the while these ten disciples are hiding behind locked doors, our scripture reading tells us that Thomas was not with them. Where had he been? Possibly he was out looking for Jesus. John's gospel tells us that he was called Didymus which translates as *Twin*. The very nickname itself implies that Thomas had a unique relationship with Jesus.

Though not biologically Jesus' twin, it is apparent that the two shared a common spirit, closer maybe it seems that did the other disciples with Christ. I have two brothers and two sisters and love them all unconditionally. If you have brothers and sisters of your own, then you must know what I mean. In addition, however, one of my brothers is also my twin. Though I love him as unconditionally as my other siblings, there is a special bond that we share. It's indescribable to anyone who does not have a twin of their own, but it binds us in a way that no other relationship can. I lost a sister a few years ago to a brain aneurism. It is hard to lose someone you love and you never fully recover from that loss, but eventually you move on. However, if my twin were to leave me without notice, I believe I would feel that my own life had ended.

The loss that Thomas felt must have been incredibly indescribable. Maybe he was not with the other Disciples because he still needed time to sort things out or maybe he was desperately trying to find the risen Christ. How disappointed and hurt he must have felt when he returned to the Disciples to learn that he had missed seeing his Lord. His doubt was not his downfall. It was reactive. Almost like that of a child who reacts to not getting his way. *If I can't share in the experience, then I will not accept that anyone has. I will not believe unless I see the marks of Jesus crucifixion in His hands and place my hand into His side.* A pretty tall order, I think.

But that is what doubt does to us. It causes us to question all that we know and believe. Sometimes our questions seem legitimate, and why shouldn't they. Many of us have found ourselves on the receiving end of some very hurtful interpretations of God's Word and because we, for whatever reason, felt unable to question those beliefs, we denied ourselves an opportunity to learn for ourselves what God had in store for each of us. Isn't wonderful to know

that God has a plan? God can and will use our doubt to strengthen our faith. Jesus let Thomas wait eight days before he appeared to the Disciples again and this time to Thomas, as well. For eight days Thomas was forced to explore his doubt, to hear from the other Disciples all that had occurred that day as Thomas was apart from them. Jesus could have appeared instantaneously during that first moment of Thomas doubt, but he didn't. And so it is for us. Our doubts, our fears and our questions should be discerned; mulled over, if you will. Jesus let that doubt work in Thomas and to strengthen all that Thomas had learned and saw during Christ time before His crucifixion and so, too, Christ allows us time to hash out our own beliefs and salvation.

There may be some here today who believe that they do not have doubt but it is reasonable to say that we all have had our doubts at one time or another. Have you ever prayed something like, "O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul, so I can go to heaven, if there is a heaven." Some of us may laugh, but doubt is usually not a laughing matter. Dealing with doubt is difficult.

A Christian businessman is laid off only six months before retirement and the company he worked for somehow managed to finagle it so that he lost all his retirement benefits. He honestly expresses his anger to God, "God, that's not fair! I don't know if Christianity is worth it! How can you say you love me when you allow something bad like this to happen." Have you ever been there? Have you ever wondered if God really did care about you?

You watch a news documentary about the devastating drought in a third world country. There's a mother cradling her dead baby crying out in anguish. You can't understand her words, but you imagine she is saying something like, "God, why did you let my baby die. All we needed was a little rain? Why did you let my baby die?" You begin to wonder how a good God

could do such a thing. Or fail to be moved to prevent it. Have you ever had these kinds of thoughts?

A man says, "I can't imagine a God who would put anyone in hell for eternity. I would never willingly torture anyone no matter how evil he was." You feel the weight of his words and begin to wonder about the doctrine of hell yourself.

Doubts; they can be nagging. They can be overwhelming. They can even devastate your faith. But as we saw in our reading today, Christ is faithful. He is faithful to be with us, to give us strength and to allow our doubts to work to our advantage, if only we continue to trust in Him. Even a believer of the status of Thomas, a Disciple who had walked with Jesus, one who had heard his teachings, witnessed the healing of the sick and even saw Lazarus raised from the dead; had doubts. He didn't runaway because of his doubt but rather he persevered.

At the end of the week, when Thomas was in the company of the disciples', Jesus appeared again to them. Immediately he went to his friend (his twin) Thomas, and asked him to touch him, doubt no more – and believe. Jesus did not reprimand Thomas for doubting nor did he ridicule him for reacting the way that he did to the news of His Resurrection. He simply met Thomas where he was.

As a result of his perseverance, Thomas was blessed. Out of this experience, Jesus, being the great teacher that he is, teaches Thomas and the others another valuable lesson concerning his resurrection. Verse 29 states, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

God delights in our humanity and through our relationship with Christ Jesus, delights in us – even when we stumble and question our existence – even when we doubt. God is there with us, even when we cannot see or feel God; God is there, beyond our senses.

Each experience of our lives, however minuscule or profound, allows us the opportunity for a fresh new start; a new hope for a new day and a new beginning. Knowledge is important, but faith is what matters most. Hold on to your faith when you doubt and when you believe. Trust that God is working through the uncertainty, the doubt and the unanswered questions of your life. AMEN.