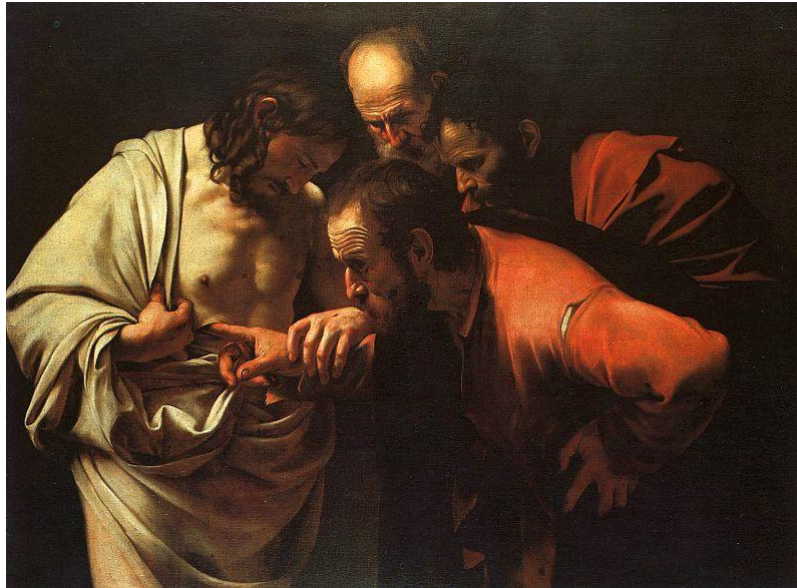


Sunday, 3 April 2016

"doubting" Thomas



John 20:19-31

{Note: you may notice a portion of this sermon as being very similar to last week's Easter sermon. I serve two congregations and I'm not at both each Sunday. I felt this repeated material was important for both churches }

Thomas has gotten a bad reputation. A “doubting Thomas” has become a phrase in the English language meaning “a person who is skeptical and refuses to believe something without proof”. People in our culture will know what a “doubting Thomas” is, but will have no idea of this biblical passage or even that Thomas was a disciple. I think that’s unfortunate because Thomas really wasn’t that much more of a doubter than any of the other disciples.

When Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds the body of Jesus missing, she doesn't think 'resurrection'. She thinks 'grave robber'. The risen Jesus even speaks to her and she still can't believe. Her mind makes him out to be the gardener until he speaks her name.

Mary goes and tells the other disciples that she has seen Jesus, but it seems they were skeptical. They were still full of fear and were hiding behind locked doors. They saw the body of Jesus was missing, but maybe it was a trap. Maybe Mary had been seeing things in her grief. It doesn't seem like they believe until Jesus actually appears to the disciples.

But one disciple wasn't at that gathering. Thomas wasn't there. I'm sure he heard Mary's story. Then I'm sure he heard the disciples' story. But, grief can do strange things to people. He probably thinks everyone around him is going crazy. Believing everyone has gone crazy is easier than believing Jesus is back from the dead. Thomas says what will make him believe, "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." It is just too much. It is too big a thing to believe without seeing it himself. This is how Thomas gets his nickname- "Doubting Thomas".

But, he's not asking for anything that hasn't been given to the other disciples. Mary didn't believe until Jesus was standing right in front of her saying her name. The Disciples didn't really believe until Jesus stood among them saying "Peace be with you" and showing them his scars. Thomas is merely asking for what has been granted to the other disciples.

We aren't really that different from those disciples in the first century. Believing is hard- especially when we are talking about a miracle like the resurrection of Jesus. Thomas is easy for most of us to relate to. We want to see it in order to believe it. We are able to doubt anything. Maybe you are dreaming. Maybe your whole life is a dream. We can't really live in that kind of extreme doubt in our everyday lives. It becomes very hard to drive a car on a bridge because it could collapse; or trust your doctor (he could be lying about his credentials, is he really a doctor? Maybe he is in league with a pharmaceutical company and he is illegally doing drug experiments on me?), or have any kind of significant relationship (maybe they are cheating on me. Maybe they don't really care about me). We have incredible powers of doubt, but it isn't very livable. At some point we have to decide what and who we will trust.

In some ways it might be harder for us to believe the resurrection because we tend to say we will only believe something if it can be repeatedly tested, videotaped, and dissected. We want to be able to put it in a test tube. If we can probe an issue in these ways, then we might believe it. I know people who don't believe in the resurrection simply because they have decided that miracles just don't happen. No one they know has come back to life after dying, therefore it just doesn't happen. They can't put it in a test tube. Not every truth can be examined with these kinds of tools though.

Thomas is asked to trust the word of his close friends- even that is hard to do when it comes to a miracle. But what about trusting the words of those we never knew? Are we to believe the witness of the disciples? We live in a world where we don't really even trust each other. People hallucinate. People lie. People make mistakes.

This is a question for history in general. How can we trust what someone has said or written about past events and people? How do we know about Napoleon, or Nero, or Henry the 8th? Really we only know because someone told us about them. Even if we visit the castle of Henry the 8th we still have to trust the words of someone that this is in fact his castle. It can be tricky to think our way through all this.

As Christians we don't want to be naïve. God has told us to love him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. John's first letter chapter 4 says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." So we are not to be naïve. We are not to believe everything that comes our way. However, we are not to outright reject everything either- that is just cynicism. We are to be discerning. We are to be like sharp swords carefully and skillfully separating truth from falsehood.

Thomas is not naïve and has stated the conditions under which he will believe. Thomas has to “see the nail marks in his hands and put [his] finger where the nails were, and put [his] hand into his side”. If Jesus allows Thomas to do these experiments, then he will believe. Until he is permitted to do this experiment, he will not believe.

Surprisingly, Jesus offers himself up to Thomas’ experiment one week later on the first day of the week- Sunday. We don’t know if Thomas actually did the experiment, but when Jesus appears Thomas believes and utters the profound statement, “My Lord and my God!” which is the climax of the Gospel of John. Jesus is Lord and God!

Thomas believes because he sees. In the Gospel of John there are at least two ways of believing. The first is by direct experience. Seeing the resurrected Jesus- Touching Jesus- Hearing Jesus- this leads to believing that he has been resurrected. This is the kind of evidence we want. We want “empirical evidence”. We want to touch his scars. But of course this kind of evidence is not always available to us. We can’t usually do history this way. We can’t talk to Napoleon or the Roman emperor Nero. We have to trust what others have said about them.

Of course we would love to have the empirical evidence. We would love to examine Jesus’ scars and have a discussion with him, but that kind of evidence is not available to us in the same way it was available to the first disciples.

We have to match the kind of truth to the kind of tool we can use to discover it. If we want to know the boiling point of water then we get a thermometer and a Bunsen burner and we perform an experiment. That's not helpful if you want to know if a painting is beautiful. Or, if you are in love with someone. Or, if you want to know if something is right or wrong. Or, if something happened in the distant past.

The second way of believing at the end of the Gospel of John is by believing what others have said. We can know London is a city in England by actually going there, but we can also choose to believe those who have gone to London and have come back to tell us about it. ... The disciples could have believed Mary. Thomas could have believed the disciples. He knew his friends were trustworthy, but he wanted a different kind of proof. And Jesus came to him. This way is not normally available to us. We still experience Jesus, sure, but in a different way than the first disciples did. We are asked to trust the words of those who experienced the risen Jesus Christ. Do we trust their story?

In February of 2010, Canada's last known First World War veteran, John Babcock, died at age 109. He was the last Canadian who could tell us directly about what it was like to be a part of the First World War. From now on we will have to rely on recorded words. We have to rely on the stories they have passed onto us. ... There was a point when the last of the original disciples who experienced the resurrected Jesus died. What we have left are their stories.

Is their story worth believing? There are good reasons to believe their story. There are 4 facts that historians agree on. First, Jesus was truly dead- he was killed by the hands of the Romans, who were very good at killing. Second, His tomb was found to be empty- some disagree about how it got that way, but it is a historical fact that the body of Jesus was gone. Third, numerous people reported seeing the resurrected Jesus. Followers and even enemies- individuals and groups, reported seeing him. About 20 years after Jesus' death, Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15) "[Jesus] appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." The early disciples believed that they had experienced the risen Jesus in a very physical way and they became willing to die for their belief that Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead. ... Many of them did die for their belief. Fourth, The early Jesus followers were strengthened. They went from a group of scared disciples huddled behind locked doors to proclaiming Jesus in the temple and across the known world. There is good evidence that Thomas went to India to preach the gospel. There are Indian Christians who trace their roots back to the preaching of Thomas. They actually call themselves Thomas Christians (Also known as Malabar, or Nasranis). So these disciples were strengthened, they were emboldened, and they grew in number. This just didn't happen with these kinds of groups when their leader was killed. Usually they scattered and the movement died. ... I believe, the best explanation for all these facts coexisting is the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Most of you don't need these kinds of facts to know he has been raised. Most of you have a faith that is just there. God has planted the faith in you. You don't believe because of arguments. But, these kinds of arguments can strengthen your faith. St. Anselm once said that theology is, "Faith seeking understanding". The faith is already there, but we strengthen it and deepen it by thinking about it. You have encountered Jesus in some way, but now you seek to understand that encounter more.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus is talking about you. Blessed are you because you have trusted this trustworthy and amazing story, even though you have not touched his scars.

We don't always have all the proof we want. We cannot reach out and touch God with our microscopes and telescopes. We can't measure God with a thermometer. Doubt, for most of us will just be a part of what it means to be human. ... This does not leave us hopeless. We are invited to trust the stories of those who did encounter him. Through their stories we mysteriously encounter him too. And though we may not be able to touch his scars, Jesus appears in the locked room of our heart and he touches our scars, and says, "Peace be with you." Amen