

### Easter Doubt

“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.” —John 20.25b

Last week we examined the path from the perplexity of our initial reaction to Easter. The idea of resurrection is so foreign to our mental world that we aren't likely to get to a mature Easter faith in one day—or even in one day a year. It is a journey, or as I portrayed it last Sunday, a path. We move from perplexity to listening to memory to sharing. It is in the midst of these movements that real faith is born.

So, where do we go next in the story? Each year the common lectionary assigns the same reading for the Sunday after Easter. We all know it well, especially preachers—or at least we *think* we know it well. It comes up every year and, frankly, since about year two of my ministry, I've been wondering if I have anything fresh to say about it. A certain pattern of avoidance has developed. This is my fifth Easter here in Longmeadow, so I decided to check back on my record for this particular Sunday: two sermons on Acts, one sermon from Curt, and one youth Sunday. Hmmm...pretty slippery, huh?

So this year I'm facing it. I'm going to preach on this well known text that is slightly annoying in its persistence. We all know it. It is, quite simply, the story of Doubting Thomas.

And already we have a problem. By calling it “the story of Doubting Thomas” we have pre-judged it and skewed our direction of interpretation. True enough, there's a character named Thomas and he experiences doubt, but the actual text is much more fluid. With this title we take something in motion and try to present it as something fixed. The Bible gives us a video clip and we try to capture it in a still photograph. So, today, let's try to be more careful about that.

First of all, it isn't one story, but two. Our text today present two, separate, post-resurrection appearances of Jesus—plus a postscript. So we don't have a fixed moment in time,

but two points on a line that extends both forward and backward in history. In the first appearance, Jesus shows himself to the disciples who are locked away for fear of the authorities. So much for their bold Easter faith! Thomas is not present in the first appearance, so we tend to gloss over this one. But there's actually a lot going on in this episode of the story.

Jesus appears and the disciples "rejoiced." They received his presence with joy and without the doubts that later plague Thomas. Right away we learn something important: Different people have different experiences of Jesus and different reactions to him. The journey of faith does not start in the same place for everybody. Christianity—though it has a core of central belief and coherence around that core—is not a "one size fits all" religion. People start with Jesus at different places and he doesn't seem to get too bothered about that. (Though some of his more anxious followers do.)

Still in the first episode, Jesus keeps things moving. The disciples rejoice, but he doesn't permit them to linger in self-congratulatory bliss. The content of his speech to them is missional. He has a job in mind for them: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Even as they are just beginning to experience the full impact of Easter, Jesus tells them to go out and share the news. Just as with last week's story, sharing the faith is an essential part of claiming it. We don't do this alone.

Finally, we get to the second part of the story and the arrival of Thomas. He missed the initial experience and it is easy for us to understand how this would have impacted the group dynamics. If you've every missed an important shared experience that a group of friends had, then you know exactly how Thomas must have felt. He felt left out and excluded...and...therefore, stubborn: "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." You can almost hear him adding, under his breath, "damnit." (Always cuss from the pulpit at least once a year, my home pastor taught me. It keeps them on their toes!)

Then a week passes. So, actually there are *three* points of time in this story that we like to collapse into one. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, though there is no indication that Thomas feels a need to carry his skepticism to such an extreme. So-called "Doubting Thomas" makes a full profession of faith: "My Lord and my God!" He goes further than the

other disciples went before. They were merely rejoicing at seeing Jesus again. He makes the full connection that in this risen Jesus is the very presence of God.

In this story, one path to Easter faith starts with Easter doubt. But just like the perplexity of last week's text from Luke, the starting point is not the ending point. Doubt is no barrier to getting to know Jesus, but we aren't encouraged to settle into it as a permanent resting place. With the gospel, the story is always moving. Because God is at work in the world, faith in God is a fluid thing. Our faith mirrors the movement of God.

Jesus then indicates that seeing will not be the only route to believing: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." As the postscript to the story indicates, the text itself will become the presence of Christ for many: "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."

There's far more going on in this familiar story than our casual categorization of it assumes. It seems to me that it is much less a story about Thomas than it is a story about Jesus. Jesus is active and moving. Jesus is acknowledging human responses, but always stretching and directing them. He never leaves us where we start out—neither with easy faith or with easy doubt. Both must be challenged. Both must grow into something more mature and demanding. There is transformation for the other disciples just as much as there is for Thomas. And more of the same is promised for readers of the Gospel.

And that means us.