

Thomas Gets a Bum Rap John 20:24-31

Every year the text of doubting Thomas is read the Sunday after Easter. Every year we hear about his pessimistic attitude and his great need for proof. In my research it was difficult to find commentaries that focused on something other than how Thomas refused to believe the other disciples. Was there a reason Thomas deliberately chose not to trust his friends? Thomas had been a faithful follower of Jesus. He vanished like the other disciples when Jesus was taken to the cross. The image painted by the commentaries visualizes Thomas as an unbeliever who failed Jesus. I think Thomas gets a bum rap.

I envision Thomas seeing himself as a failure because Jesus appeared while Thomas was gone. After all, Thomas was the only disciple excluded from Jesus' triumphal appearance. Even Mary saw Jesus before Thomas. Wouldn't you feel disappointed and somewhat of a failure if you were Thomas? Maybe Thomas felt such great disappointment that he needed to receive a bit of grace directly from Jesus before he could see the wonders of the resurrection. John does not tell us how the other ten responded when Mary told them Jesus had appeared to her. Did they doubt as well? When we look at the entire story, all Thomas really wanted

was the same experience the other disciples had with Jesus. Jesus appeared to them and saying, "See my hands. Feel my side." Like anyone who has lost a friend or relative, Thomas yearned to see Jesus and hear his voice one more time. He wanted to believe his friends spoke the truth but Thomas was grieving.

According to John, Thomas' wish was granted. It was one week later, the Jewish Sabbath had ended and the disciples gathered again locking themselves in the upper room. This time Thomas was sure to be with them. Jesus appeared with the same words of peace and the same invitation, specifically to Thomas, to feel His hands and sides. Thomas did not need to see the proof; only Jesus' voice and face were needed for Thomas to believe. Thomas no longer felt like a failure he had received the greatest gift of all; God's grace. Thomas was given a fresh start with renewed strength to share the news of Christ's resurrection with those who didn't believe or were let down by the church and/or Jesus.

This day was the beginning of a new life for Thomas and the other disciples. These appearances of Jesus gave them the opportunity to experience the first Christian Sabbath. John writes that the disciples returned on the first day of the week. In the Jewish tradition, Sabbath is

held from sundown to sundown on the last day of the week. In the Christian tradition, we begin our week with a day of Sabbath worshipping God. The early Christians gathered in secret to protect themselves from the dangers of the Religious leaders. They often spent hours listening to the stories about Jesus. Many centuries later, John Wesley continued the Sabbath tradition as a time to hear the scriptures preached and then spend the afternoon in study and reflection of the message. Today worship is a bit different. We no longer have to worship in secret. Now that we are free to worship how much time to we really spend with God?

However you choose to spend your Sabbath, there are a few key elements that make Sabbath different from every other day. Thomas shared with us that God's saving grace came through his heart experience with Jesus. Thomas had seen Jesus face to face. Today, seeing Jesus face to face in a physical form, like Thomas, is not likely to occur. Even though it's not impossible, it would be difficult for us to recognize the person standing before us as Jesus. However, that does not mean we cannot experience Christ's presence in our worship. For me, I've always experienced God as my "Jiminy Cricket" or my conscience. I know God's presence when my spirit finds peace and courage. I also see evidence of

God's presence through others around me as they live out their moral values making the right decisions rather than being persuaded by the popular vote. Thomas found evidence of God when he received grace restoring his relationship with God. Are you in need of God's grace, strength, or advice? Have you found God's presence here today?

The second thing we learn from Thomas is that it is time we stop questioning what we can't see and put our trust and faith in God. We say we believe and have faith, but do we really? Can we look at the finance statement in our bulletin then look at our checkbooks and say "I can't afford to give any more?" Believing and trusting in God is putting our faith into action. There is a great deal of work that needs to be created and carried out if we are going to continue be God's servants. Are we willing to support new programs with our ideas, time, and talents? This leads us to the final lesson from Thomas. In his Sabbath experience he saw Christ face to face restoring his relationship with God, he learned to believe and stop doubting, and he prepared himself to return to the world ministering for God.

Our day of Sabbath has not changed from the first Sabbath experience with Thomas and the Disciples. As we enter worship we come

with hearts prepared to meet Christ face to face. We anticipate the experience of restoring our brokenness with God, resting in God's arms, and finding the strength and courage to complete the tasks placed before us in the next week. We come believing and trusting in what we can't see but know is alive. Easter is not a celebration of the anniversary of Christ's first appearances to the disciples; it is a celebration that Christ has appeared to us today.

John's message to the reader is that Christ is still alive today. This is news we take for granted by saying we believe but are we truly living it. Jesus commissioned the disciples to continue telling people that Christ is making a place for them in heaven if they truly believe. This message is for us as well. Christ is preparing a place for us. Do you believe or do you need physical proof? If you believe then it's time you help others find the evidence they need to believe. If you are still unsure yourself, what are you doing to find out the truth? Seeing Christ for the first time is still big news to the Christian community and yet the number of believers is declining. God is ready to reverse this trend; but God needs our help. Are you ready to invest? In the next year we will be looking at various needs in our community. We need your help to discover the best way to tackle

and eliminate the gaps in our ministry. The gaps are the open wounds in Christ's body where the nails and the spear made Jesus bleed.

God has healed those wounds but now we are all needed to be physical the body of Christ in the world. Last week, and every time we take communion, we asked God to make us be the body of Christ for the world. The stories of our wounds and God's healing powers have given us the evidence we need to know that God is alive in our community. Now we are called to be the body of Christ for the world. Offering the opportunities to study, experience, and restore our hearts, minds, and souls to God. Will you be a part of Christ's body for the world or will your doubts keep you from believing and trusting in God? God is waiting to restore you faith so you can become part of the body of Christ for the world. Come; join with us so we can close the gaps of our ministry.

Amen.