

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“God’s Love is Greater than Your Doubt” (John 20:24-29)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Every single year on the Second Sunday of Easter the appointed gospel lesson is always the same: the account in the Gospel According to John about the first two appearances of the Risen Jesus to his fearful disciples. In the first of these two appearances, which occurred the evening after Jesus had been raised from the dead, Jesus proclaimed, “Peace be with you”, showed them his scars, then breathed on them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” and then taught about the importance of forgiveness (John 20:19-23).

Today I am preaching briefly on the second of these two appearances of the Risen Jesus to his disciples, which occurred a week later. Thomas, who had been absent and had missed the Risen Jesus’ first appearance to them, did not believe what his fellow disciples had told him about seeing their resurrected Lord. Thomas graphically dismissed 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” (John 20:24-25). John does not record any of the other disciples arguing with Thomas or trying to convince him that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead—apparently Thomas was someone with whom it was always a waste of time to argue (maybe you know someone like that...or maybe you are someone like that).

Even in the church we proclaim over and over in The Apostles’ Creed “I believe in Jesus Christ...on the third day he rose again” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 96) and in The Nicene Creed “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ...on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures” (*BCP* 358), and yet there are still many people who like Thomas doubt the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. I hate to admit to you that I have known clergy who do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. With all due respect to them I do not know why they remain clergy—maybe they really like vestments and liturgy and church architecture, though I suspect the overriding factor is the pension, but I digress. Over the centuries there have been many theories developed against the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One theory is that Christ did not actually die on the cross but swooned or fainted, and that in the coolness of the tomb he revived. A few things to consider here... first, the Roman soldiers were so convinced of Jesus' death on the cross that they refused to break his legs to expedite his death and instead pierced his side—and from his side emerged blood and water (John 19:31-34), meaning his blood had already begun to coagulate and separate into hemoglobin and serum. Second, Jesus' body had already been embalmed with about a hundred pounds of spices and wrapped in linen (John 19:38-42), so Jesus would have had to survive that embalming and then break out of the tightly wrapped linen. Jesus would then have had to roll away the massive stone that had also been sealed with pitch, and then overtake the elite Roman soldiers assigned to guard his tomb...and then escape.

A second theory is that Jesus' disciples stole his body from the tomb and hid it. These would be the same disciples who without exception had fled from Jesus on the night he was betrayed and arrested, the same disciples who initially doubted what Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph told them about personally seeing the Risen Jesus, and as we see in the gospel reading today, the same disciples who were so afraid and so ashamed that they locked themselves into a room for fear of being found out that they had been companions of Jesus.

A third theory is that Jesus' body was never placed in the tomb to begin with, but instead was tossed into a mass grave with the bodies of others who had been executed. If that were the case, then elite Roman guards would neither had been assigned to guard his tomb in the first place (Matthew 27:62-66) nor later told the chief priests what had actually happened (Matthew 28:11). Moreover, to disprove the rapid spread of the news of Jesus' resurrection, all the Roman authorities would have had to do was exhume Jesus' body and put it on display.

A fourth theory is that the many eyewitnesses who claimed to see the Risen Jesus in fact saw a hallucination instead. This would have meant that with the exception of John, each and every one of the other apostles who went on to suffer brutal, violent martyrdom, lied about being an eyewitness of the Risen Jesus—and that even at the threat of unspeakable suffering not a single one of them said, "Wait! It's not true. Jesus was not raised from the dead. It was a hallucination. We made it all up." But none of them said anything of the sort, because when it came to the resurrection of Jesus, none of them were making any of it up. Would you?

In addition to the two appearances of the Risen Jesus to his disciples that John records in today's gospel passage, in his First Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul also wrote that Jesus "appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time" (1 Corinthians 15:6). A little later Paul was even more emphatic about the importance of Jesus' resurrection in the Christian faith:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain...For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:14, 16-19).

And yet, in spite of all this, many people within and without the church remain like Thomas—they just do not believe in Jesus' resurrection. And all the theories that Jesus swooned, or had his body stolen by his disciples, or was never placed in the tomb at all, or that the Risen Jesus was a mere hallucination, remain completely irrelevant. Like Thomas they want to see it to believe it. Like an oscillating fan, some move back and forth between faith and doubt. This may include you.

So back to Thomas for a moment...as it turned out his fellow disciples did not need to argue with him about the reality of Jesus' resurrection because "although the doors were shut," the Risen Jesus visited his disciples again the following Sunday evening—because no one can shut the door on the love of the Risen Jesus—and this time Thomas was there. John tells us what happened next:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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" (John 20:26-29).

The Risen Jesus neither rebuked Thomas for his doubt, nor argued with him; instead, he showed Thomas his scars, scars that testify to the reality of God's love for him and for the whole world, scars that show God's love is stronger than death.

Jesus individually and personally showed Thomas the scars to remind him of God's unconditional, all-knowing, all-forgiving love for him—and it was this love of God that broke down all the walls of doubt and reached the heart of Thomas who finally believed, and famously responded in faith, “My Lord and my God!” Thomas' response to the Risen Jesus' proof of his love for him was just as individual and personal, “*My Lord and my God!*” God's love was greater than Thomas' doubt.

Similarly the Apostle Paul, who as we have just read underscored the centrality of Jesus' resurrection in the Christian faith, also saw the Risen Jesus while on the road to Damascus, the same Jesus whose resurrection he had not only dismissed, like Thomas, but unlike Thomas whose followers Paul persecuted even unto death. But like Thomas, Paul individually and personally experienced the unconditional love of God for him, and set the course for the rest of his life, a life he described this way in his Letter to the Galatians, “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*” (Galatians 2:20). God's love was greater than Paul's doubt.

But enough about Thomas and Paul...what about you?

Maybe like Thomas and Paul you used to doubt or dismiss Jesus' resurrection but you believe it now because you have individually and personally experienced the love of God. Maybe you oscillate between faith and doubt, or maybe like Thomas and Paul you would like to see the Risen Jesus in person. There are a few verses from today's passage from the First Letter of Peter that meet us right in that place—listen to this: “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:6-9).

In other words, you would not be reading this sermon right now if there was not a place in your heart where “although you have not seen him, you love him”, where “even though you do not see him now, you believe in him”—for again as Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And regardless of your oscillations between faith and doubt, someday you will indeed see the Risen Jesus, because God's love is greater than your doubt.

Amen.