

“Tenacious Thomas”

Introduction: In this Easter season we are looking at some of the early, post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and considering, and seeking to find encouragement in, the various ways the risen Jesus came alongside and met his fearful, despairing, and even doubting followers. As we see how Jesus tenderly met his people, we can be reminded that we are loved by a gracious God who does not abandon us when times get tough but walks with us in the valley of the shadows, helping to bring his light, the light of life, into our lives.

Today we’ll focus on how Jesus met the needs of a disciple who has been dubbed “doubting Thomas,” but I’m not sure that’s really a fair label. Tenacious Thomas might be better as this fellow certainly wrestled with doubt, but in a way that led him to a deep faith. I would suggest to you that doubt is not a bad thing but can be a helpful thing as we wrestle with it. It’s one of the key ways our faith becomes strengthened so that we can remain firmly anchored in Jesus through the many and various storms we face in life.

If you have doubts in your heart as you come to worship today, or as you look at the world around you, welcome to the human race! But be grateful as well for what God may want to teach you through them. As we hear the text, in response to the tenacity of Thomas, keep an eye out for the tender grace of Jesus. [READ]

I. Unless I see . . .

A. As the event of resurrection unfolds, recall that last week, on the evening of resurrection day, we were behind locked doors with the disciples who were afraid for their lives. We noted that they were afraid that the religious and civil authorities might now come after them, they were afraid of what friends and neighbors might say about what seemed to be a failed object of their faith, and they were possibly afraid of how Jesus might respond to them given that they had all deserted him while he hung on the cross. But then we saw Jesus making his way graciously not only through the locked doors of their room but also through the locked doors of their hearts. He met them in their fear and spoke a word of peace – a word of forgiveness and well-being – and then called them to extend that peace to others.

A prayer from the Canons of Dort (an early 17th c. confessional document of the church of the Netherlands) expresses what took place in that room: “Resurrected Lord, your crafty Holy Spirit gets into the deepest places of human lives, loosing locked-down hearts and softening crusty ones.”

B. The first “other” the disciples went to was one of their own, Thomas, whose heart was still in “locked-down” mode. If you missed all that we talked about last week, so did Thomas! It seems as if Thomas was one of those guys who needed to grieve alone but the news his friends had just experienced was too good not to share so sometime during the week they tracked him down and told him, “We have seen the Lord!” And they no doubt shared all that had taken place, including that Jesus had showed them his scars – the places in his hands and side where the nails and spear had penetrated. Now I’m sure Thomas believed that his friends had seen something. He just wanted the same evidence that they had been given: “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.”

C. We like Thomas, don't we? We like him because he is tenacious. He's a straight up, practical, no-nonsense kind of guy. He's both highly courageous and intellectually honest.

1. Earlier in John we see one instance of his courage when Jesus had fled Jerusalem into the wilderness to escape a group of Jews who wanted to stone him for claiming to be God (10:22-42). But when Jesus heard that his good friend Lazarus had died, Jesus made plans to return. His disciples didn't think this to be very wise, but Thomas was willing: "If he goes, we go, even if it means we must die with him" (11:16).

2. A bit later we see the intellectual honesty of Thomas during a conversation Jesus was having with his followers about how he must soon return to the Father but that he would be preparing a place for them and would then come back and take them to be with him, and that they of course knew the way to the place he would be going. "Huh?" accompanied by a blank stare and a nodding of the head was probably the general response of most at the table to this bizarre news. As one writer describes the scene, listening to the words of Jesus here is a little like being part of those class lectures when the professor is talking on a level entirely above you and everyone listening is acting like they understand exactly what is being said but in reality, no one has a clue, and all are afraid to ask! But not Thomas. He raises his hand and says, "Jesus, I actually have no idea what you're talking about!" (14:1-5).

II. Put your finger here . . .

A. And so Thomas' desire to see and touch the nail and spear marks, to confirm for himself that the one who was crucified is alive again, is not surprising. It's what we'd all like to be able to do. And again, we see the tenderness of Jesus, meeting Thomas where he needed to be met. It was a week later, in that same room, and did you notice, the doors were locked again? I'm actually so glad to read that! It means that the disciples were still battling their fear, that it hadn't disappeared in a week's time, that fear can be a real struggle, and that while we struggle, Jesus isn't going to give up on us because he begins by pronouncing "peace be with you" yet again! I need that "yet again!" don't you? Transformation rarely happens overnight, or even in a week, but God is tenderly persistent with us.

B. What a moment that must have been, as Jesus then offered his scars to Thomas. Jesus simply and graciously invited Thomas to discover what he needed to discover, responding to his tenacity with tender grace, encouraging Thomas to move beyond his doubt. As far as we can tell, Thomas never got as far as touching Jesus; he saw what he needed and blurted out an amazing confession of faith: "My Lord and my God!" And then Jesus pulls us into that room with this invitation: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Illustration: I'm sure as you have driven around Boston's north shore you have noticed a horse farm or two! I'm actually a little freaked out when it comes to getting on a horse and so am in awe of those who can ride well. I'm even more in awe of those who do those jumping competitions! I cannot imagine flying over a barricade and landing safely on the other side on such a powerful animal. Seasoned teachers of the sport tell us that even the greatest riders don't come by this ability easily and all must overcome a common obstacle: their own perception. That is, unless a rider can approach the barrier with the confidence that they and the horse will land safely, even though they often cannot see the other side, they will never become adept at jumping. One trainer shares this no-nonsense advice: "Take your heart and throw it over the fence. Then jump after it."

C. The point is, we are among those who have not seen, like Thomas and the disciples saw, yet we can see through what they saw, enough, at least, to jump. The experience of Thomas and the disciples reveals the historical nature of our faith, that in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus God acted in space and time and history. The Bible includes many metaphors as it seeks to reveal who God is, but Jesus isn't one of them, and neither is his resurrection. He is not just "risen in our hearts;" he is really risen, physically, with scars, and has conquered a real death, which is important if we want him to conquer ours as well and guide us to live a life that is really life.

D. How are we to see? We have eyewitness testimony, as John goes on to say:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

We have what we need, including the testimony of a formerly tenacious skeptic, to help us wrestle with our doubts and give us reasonable ground for jumping into the life that is truly life. So . . .

You might want to take John up on his offer to reveal real life to you. Bring your doubts to his gospel and read, at one sitting, if possible (it will take less time than a Netflix movie!). Reflect on the catalogue of signs and events and words that he has recorded for you. See if the crafty Holy Spirit might just come alongside those places where your heart feels locked-down and crusty. As you make space for the Spirit, I wonder what he might help you to see?