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The Third Sunday of Easter
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Jesus Assures Us of His Resurrection

On the evening of that first Easter, Jesus' followers were hiding in a home in Jerusalem. The Master's death on Friday had destroyed their hopes and dreams. Now they feared that the mobs that had arrested him would come for them, too. The rumors that people had seen Jesus alive reached their ears, but they hardly knew what to believe—or even if to believe. But then Jesus appeared and took their doubts and fears away. The doubter and skeptic that lives in all of us looks for peace and proof, and Jesus offers it in the Gospel for today as he greets his disciples and doubting Thomas.

Sermon

John 20:19-31

The Transforming Truth of Easter

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

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 know a decent amount about some of the disciples, but we don't know much about Thomas. We know about Simon Peter. He was an average fisherman from Galilee who would go on to lead the Christian church in Jerusalem. We know about St. Matthew. He worked for the Roman government as a tax collector and would go on to write one of the four gospels. We know about St. Luke. He wasn't one of the Twelve, but he was certainly a follower of Jesus. He was a physician who carefully investigated the events leading up to and

following Christ's life, death, and resurrection and recorded them in the books of Luke and Acts. We know a decent amount about some of the disciples, but we don't know much about Thomas, until John puts him center stage here in chapter 20. Here we find out that Thomas experienced the transforming truth of Easter in a special way. The Easter truth turns fear to joy and turns doubt into belief.

The apostles had left their occupations, hometowns, and families behind when they began to follow Jesus. For Peter, this meant leaving the fishing boats and nets on the shore of the sea of Galilee and going wherever Jesus went. For Matthew, this meant no more going from house to house collecting taxes for Caesar. Instead, it meant following Jesus from town to town hearing him proclaim the gospel. We're not sure what this meant for Thomas. Was he from Jerusalem, Galilee, or some other town? Was he a fisherman? A shepherd? Did he have a family? The Bible doesn't answer these questions for us, but it does tell us that he too left everything to follow Jesus and, just like the other eleven, he was chosen by Jesus to be one of the twelve apostles.

He experienced everything that the other apostles did. He ate of the five loaves and two fish that Jesus miraculously used to feed thousands of people, and then he and the other eleven each gathered up a basketful of leftovers. He saw Jesus use some mud to give the gift of sight to a man who had been born blind. When Lazarus died and had been in a tomb for four days, Thomas heard Jesus call out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And then he saw Lazarus alive again. Thomas received the same instruction from Jesus as the other eleven apostles. He heard Jesus say, "I am the light of the world." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the way and the truth and the life." Just like the rest, Thomas experienced every miracle, every sermon, and every lesson from Jesus for three years. Just like the rest, Thomas believed that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

Just like the rest that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, he saw the torches, lanterns, and weapons carried by a detachment of soldiers headed their way. He saw Judas leading them. He saw the Christ betrayed. What did Thomas do? We know that after Jesus was arrested Peter and another disciple followed Jesus to the high priest's house. Was Thomas the other disciple, or was he one of the other ten who took off running? We're not sure. We know Peter adamantly denied Jesus and then wept bitterly. We know Judas was overcome by the guilt and shame of what he had done. We know that not one disciple, not Andrew, not Matthew, not Thomas, stood with Jesus. They were all afraid. They all abandoned him.

They all saw what happened the next day. Jesus, their teacher, their friend, the one they left everything to follow, the one in whom they hoped, the one they believed to be the promised Savior, was crucified. Thorns pierced his head. Nails pierced his hands. After it was finished and Jesus had given up his spirit, a spear pierced his side, "bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." Jesus Christ was dead. Thomas and the others were afraid. If the Jewish officials were able to kill Jesus, what would stop them from killing them too? Jesus Christ was dead. If the Jewish officials had succeeded in killing the apostles next, what hope would they have? And so, while Christ was dead and in the tomb, a cloud of confusion, despair, and fear fell over the disciples.

Then, on Easter morning a glimmer of hope pierced the despair and fear that clouded the apostles. At first light, Mary went to the tomb and found the stone was rolled away. She told Peter and John who ran to the tomb and saw for themselves that it was empty. Jesus wasn't there, but they still didn't quite understand what this meant. Then Jesus appeared to Mary, and Mary reported to the apostles that she had seen Jesus alive. But the apostles still didn't quite understand what this meant. They were still confused, gathered in a room with the doors locked and afraid. Then, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord" (John 21:19-20). At that moment the truth of Easter was staring them in the face. Christ is risen! This was no spiritual presence. This was no vision. This was the same Jesus whose hands and side had been pierced. This was the same Jesus who was dead yesterday. This was Jesus, true God, true man, raised to life. This is the truth of Easter, that Jesus Christ who died to take away the sins of the world defeated death, left the tomb, and lives. He lives!

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Christ Jesus lives and because he lives you also will live.

The truth of Easter turns the guilt and shame of sin into the peace and joy of forgiveness. The truth of Easter turns fear of the future into a confidence that trusts God's guidance in all things. The truth of Easter turns the fear of death into a hopeful joy of seeing Jesus face to face. The truth of Easter, that Christ is alive, turned the apostles' fear into joy that evening when they were gathered. The truth of Easter does the same for us today.

But not all of the Twelve were gathered there that day. "Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' but he said to them, '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'" (John 20:24-25). For whatever reason, Thomas simply refused to believe. Was he still gripped by fear? Was he still lost and confused? Could he simply not comprehend how someone could come back to life after being brutalized the way Jesus was? We're not sure. But we know he refused to believe. Thomas claimed that the only way he would believe was if he put his fingers where the nails were and put his hand where the spear was.

Thomas's words might sound similar to some things we hear people say today. "Unless the fossil records and archeological digs perfectly match the accounts of the Bible, I will not believe." "Unless this God, who's apparently almighty, starts taking care of me and my life, I will not believe." "Unless I see some evidence with my own two eyes, I will not believe." We hear Thomas's words and we think of unbelievers today who say similar things. But we would be mistaken to look at Thomas as though we were looking through a window, as if here we are safe and secure in the church and he's out there, struggling with doubts and making demands of God. No, it would be better to look at Thomas and see a mirror. Thomas believed in Jesus. Thomas followed Jesus. Thomas put his hope in Jesus. Can you see yourself in Thomas? During a difficult time, doubt crept in and hurt his faith in Jesus. Can you see yourself in Thomas?

"A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe'" (John 20:26-27). Why did Jesus do it? Thomas's demands were extreme, arrogant, shameful even. Who is he to make demands of God? And yet, Jesus obliged. Why did he do it? Grace is the only answer. God treated Thomas's doubts and demands with undeserved love, grace upon grace. Thanks be to God that he treats us the same way. When we're weak, when we're confused, when we're arrogant, when we're shameful, Jesus is there, always there, showing us that he's our loving Savior who died and rose to take away our sins.

But we can't touch the nail marks. We can't see the Savior. How can we be sure? How can we stop doubting and believe? John wrote, "Jesus did many other miraculous 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 Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). How can you be sure? It is written. For the man who was born blind, it was the ability to see. For Lazarus, it was walking out of the tomb. For Thomas, it was seeing and feeling the resurrected Lord. All of these were done that they may see and know Jesus for who he is. What about us? For you and for me, so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, it is written. These are written. The Scriptures are written. God's Word is written. In the Word, we find Christ. Better said, through the Word Christ finds us.

The truth of what happened on Easter morning is that Jesus Christ, the promised Savior, rose from the dead. His resurrection proves that your sins are forgiven. His resurrection swung the gates of heaven open wide

for all who believe in him. Christ is risen! This is the transforming truth of Easter that turns fear into joy and doubts into belief. This is the truth that is written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In Christ's name, you are forgiven! In Christ's name, life is yours! Treasure the truth of Easter. Rejoice in the truth of Easter. Live in the truth of Easter. Give thanks for the truth of Easter. Christ is risen! Amen.