

7.9.23 Sermon

Proof of the Promise | John 20:24-30

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Good morning!

Wow. Thank you, Sophia. I will endeavor to preach the word of the Lord.

Today, we're going to explore the Book of John, specifically, John 20. I'll start by reading from the end of the chapter, John 20, verses 24 through 31. "Now Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came," it reads.

To set the scene, in case you haven't been following along, this takes place after Jesus has died, was buried for three days, and then rose again. Some people have seen him now, Mary Magdalene and Solomon among them. He appeared to the disciples a week previous to the passage we are reading, but Thomas wasn't present at that time. Now, Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

"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.'"

A week later, the disciples were gathered in the house again, and this time, Thomas was with them. Despite the doors being locked, Jesus came and stood among them, echoing his previous words, "Peace be with you."

He then said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." In response, Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God." For the moment, we will stop there.

Last time we discussed the Book of John was three weeks ago. Since then, we have had a beautiful worship in the arts morning together. Then, last week, we had our communal pancake breakfast. I want to mention how much I enjoyed those times with you all. The camaraderie and shared experience were truly heartwarming.

Three weeks ago, Pastor Tracy shared some profound wisdom about Jesus's appearances post-resurrection. First, he appeared to Mary Magdalene, then to the group of disciples who were in a room with the door locked, save for Thomas. Pastor Tracy offered deep insight into how each of these disciples responded when Jesus appeared to them.

I noticed something that all of the disciples have in common. When Jesus shows up, they weren't expecting to see him alive again. It was unexpected and shocking, and not what they were thinking was going to happen.

Mary thought it must be the gardener at first. The disciples didn't believe Mary when she told them that she'd seen the Lord. Then, the disciples saw him. However, Thomas didn't believe the disciples when they said, "We've seen the Lord." It's like a theme. They're all having the same response. First, they wonder, "Whoa, is that really Jesus?" Then, when someone tells them, they're incredulous, thinking, "No, I don't believe it, I can't believe that."

I think that somehow, throughout church history, Thomas has been singled out and judged for his incredulity, as if he should have immediately believed the other disciples. Yet in fact, he responded exactly the same way as all of them.

As I pondered this, I began to wonder why they were so surprised. To us, reading the whole gospel, everything points to Jesus's resurrection. We're not surprised because we've grown up with Easter Sunday every year, everyone saying, "He is risen." We, looking back 2000 years later, have a different perspective.

But for the disciples in the moment, why were they so surprised? According to the Gospels, Jesus had been telling them that this was going to happen all along. That's what we read anyway. They'd also seen several people resurrected as they traveled along with Jesus. They'd seen the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, and most recently, they saw Lazarus raised from the dead. They'd seen this happen before, so why were they so surprised?

Then I thought, maybe they looked at those raisings differently. They saw that Jesus had done them. Now Jesus was dead, and perhaps they thought the raisings were over, dead along with him. Who's going to raise him if he is the one who needs to be raised? Maybe that's why it was so unexpected, even though they'd seen it before. Those were just some musings that I had, as I thought about why they were all so shocked.

At the same time, I would certainly be shocked too. Let's just talk about Thomas for a little bit. What do we know about Thomas from the Gospel of John, just from John's Gospel?

First of all, there's the twin thing. It says in the text, "Now Thomas, also known as Dittmas." Dittmas is a Greek word that means twin, and Thomas comes from the Aramaic word 'tehomā', which also means twin. I never knew that before I studied this to prepare for today. Thomas means twin, and Didymus means twin. Basically, the gospel is saying, "Now this guy who we call twin, who is also called Twin."

So, both of those names mean twin and probably that wasn't his original name. Some church traditions suggest that his name was Judas, a common name at that time. Perhaps the twin nicknames stuck, especially after the other Judas turned out to be the betrayer.

There's also a hint of tradition that maybe Thomas looked a lot like Jesus, and so it was kind of a joke among the disciples, "Oh, you guys are twins." That's why he was called Twin. Or maybe he was just a twin, and that was his nickname. We don't know.

But this is something kind of interesting I wanted to share. It doesn't have a huge amount to do with where we're going with this, so bear with me. We see glimpses of Thomas, individually, in two other places in John, first in John 11.

When Jesus decided to go to Bethany, after Lazarus had died, his disciples tried to dissuade him. They reminded him about the religious leaders who tried to stone him the last time he was there. They questioned why he would want to return to a place where there was such danger.

Despite their reservations, Jesus was adamant about going. In the ensuing conversation, Thomas emerged with a sentiment that was both dramatic and brave. He said, "Let us also go that we may die with him." Although this statement might seem overly dramatic, it also revealed Thomas' commitment. He was ready to face any outcome, even death, if that's where following Jesus would lead him.

Interestingly, we do not see much of Thomas when Jesus was actually arrested and executed. His absence left us to wonder what happened to him during that period. If he was so ready to die with Jesus, why was he not present during these crucial moments? This mystery adds another dimension to Thomas' story.

The second individual story about Thomas is found in John 14. Here, Jesus talks about his Father's house with many rooms and how he was going there to prepare a place for his disciples. When Jesus mentioned that they knew the way to where he was going, Thomas asked, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. So how can we know the way?"

This question was factual, almost simple in its lack of deeper understanding. Yet, it was also profoundly human. Thomas was keen on understanding facts and realities, and although he may have missed the metaphorical layers in Jesus' teachings, don't we all, at times?

These are just two glimpses into Thomas' character. He seems to be a person who thinks a lot, someone with a complex internal world. Jesus answered his question by stating, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If you want to come to the Father, you come through me." Such were the interactions and lessons in the life of Thomas, the disciple who dared to question and committed to follow, even unto death.

I just noticed that the question for Thomas is, how do we get there? He just seems like a really concrete, practical kind of guy. It's not a full portrait at all. But just from those little glimpses, I feel like Thomas is pretty relatable. He's just a dude. He's honest. He's a bit pessimistic. But I'll tell you what he thinks.

He's gotten kind of a bad rap. You know, everybody calls him Doubting Thomas. Who have you guys heard that before? Doubting Thomas. That's like what he's famous for. But like, is doubt unusual, or bad? I've always heard him talked about with an admonition not to doubt. But honestly, doubt is a very natural and human response, when confronted with the preposterous and unbelievable.

Thomas, who strikes me as a plain talker, was just the one to say it clearly. I can't believe this until I see the evidence right in front of me. And here's maybe the main thing that I want us to notice this morning. It's how does Jesus respond to Thomas in all of this? What does Jesus do? You want to shout it out? He just shows him, right? Would you say do you just look?

Jesus shows up. Jesus just comes and he's like, here I am. I heard you wanted to see my hands. Here they are. You can look, you can touch them. I don't see an ounce of shame coming from Jesus. I don't see any scolding coming from Jesus. I just see Jesus saying, hey, Thomas, I heard you wanted to see what was going on. Look, you can touch it. Here's my hand.

The text doesn't even say that Thomas actually touched him. It just tells us that he said something remarkable. The first written down confession in the Gospel of John of Jesus as God. Thomas says, "My Lord, and my God,". What a wild ride for Thomas. We don't even know part of it, that part of it, where it goes dark, during Jesus's arrest and execution, but Thomas has been on a ride. And here he arrives, with Jesus coming to him and giving him what he needs. Thomas said, I need to see it. And Jesus was like, here I am.

That was what Thomas needed to be able to believe. And beyond believing that Jesus had risen from the dead, he went further than that, and he believed, "oh, you're my God." That's huge. That's huge. Can you imagine a Jewish man who had grown up saying over and over, there is one God, and he makes this confession, "Jesus, my Lord, and my god," wow. It's huge.

All of this with Thomas's story makes me think about how we all come to faith. Come to God, come to Jesus, needing whatever we need, in order to let ourselves believe. We catch this frozen moment here in Thomas's journey into belief, we see a glimpse of what he needed to let himself believe the preposterous and unexplainable. We see that Jesus doesn't withhold himself from Thomas. He comes in and shows him the evidence that Thomas needs.

So, I want us to just think about ourselves, for a minute here, and our own journeys into faith. I wonder if there is a resurrection, that we have a hard time believing?

What does the concept of resurrection mean in our lives? I don't refer to the specific belief of whether Jesus rose from the dead or not, but rather the personal interpretation and significance of 'resurrection'. What seemingly preposterous gift of life do we find hard to accept in our own lives? Which areas of incredible goodness seem too far-fetched to believe? What fits into that category for you, and for me?

Here are a few things that cross my mind. Off the top of my head, I think, sometimes it's hard for me to believe in the immensity and freedom of love. I struggle to fully accept that I'm not rejected or judged for my mistakes and failures. It feels almost unbelievable that I'm genuinely accepted and loved just as I am right now. There are times when I doubt if I'm truly growing and learning each day.

Further, I question whether I will ever become the full embodiment of who and what I was created to be. I worry about the possibility that I may have ruined everything, being brutally honest here. And sometimes, I worry that it might be too late for my dreams. These are just some of the thoughts that linger in my mind. It's like, sometimes I believe in that kind of 'resurrection' for myself, and then other days, not so much.

Yet, if Jesus is urging us to confront and accept these uncertainties – those parts of our lives we thought were dead or would never live, the things that are too good to be true – what could that mean? This was Thomas's experience, and it can be ours too. What would that look like for us?

Maybe acknowledging these fears simply means being honest with ourselves and opening up to Jesus about them. Maybe it's about not shying away from the pain of loss or disappointment. So, what does it mean for Jesus's resurrection to flow into our empty spots? How would it feel to let his acceptance melt away my incredulity?

Perhaps the outcome won't be as we expect, maybe we won't get exactly what we want. But when 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life' flows into the void of our doubts, it's inevitable that our perspective would change. We would begin to see things differently and realize that there is life in those voids after all.

So, for now, let's leave these thoughts here and take a moment to reflect on them.

There are a few more verses in this chapter. They are sort of a conclusion to this whole gospel. Even though there's like an epilogue, this is still to come in the last chapter, which is next. But this conclusion points to why the whole thing was written. It was written for the community of believers who came after. It was written for those who didn't get a chance to see Jesus before He ascended.

It was written so that even without seeing him in the flesh, they, we would still be able to know Him and believe. And I must admit, I'm going to share with you my interpretation of this part of Scripture, because I think that this conclusion starts a bit earlier than is obvious. Because I'm going to put the start right here.

"Then Jesus told him, because you have seen me you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen and yet 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 continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

See that, that last thing that Jesus says? I've many times heard what Jesus said there in a scolding way. Right, like, "Thomas, you're okay, I guess, but not as good as people who believe without seeing me." Right? That's what I've often thought.

But I realized that's just the judgey attitude. That's not exactly there in the text. And when I Judge Thomas, I'm actually judging myself. Like, you're okay, I guess, not as good as these other people. But now I look at this line. And I wonder if it's there to lead into the last bit, which is totally directed at the generations of those who would believe later.

Like, that last thing, written in Jesus's voice in the story, is meant to be an encouragement for those who didn't get to see him. Right, that first generation of Christians, after the disciples, and the second and third, and all the way down along and tangled spiritual genealogy to us here today. I think rather than being a burden on Thomas, it's an encouragement to us.

"That by believing we may have life in his name." So now I look at it in a new way. I see it as either Jesus said that in such a loving way, that Thomas didn't feel less than. Because I think that Jesus never makes anybody feel less than.

Perhaps those words were actually inserted into Jesus's voice by the writer, aiming to communicate with believers who came along later. Regardless, I think it's intended as a form of encouragement to the entire community of believers.

Moreover, there's another thing that I've been pondering. Scripture refers to the believing community as the "body of Christ." It's a well-known fact that we all harbor areas of doubt, areas where we cannot believe unless we see firsthand. It's a fundamental aspect of our humanity.

The essential element we all need to perceive, I believe, is the body of the risen Christ, akin to how Thomas did. Now, what does that signify for us?

In my opinion, we are summoned together as a community to demonstrate to one another and to our neighbors what the hope of resurrection looks like. Collectively, we are the evidence of the promise, the wounded hands inside, walking, living, and alive. We stand as the assurance that each individual requires, the assurance that each of us needs to touch as we continue to delve deeper into faith and acceptance of this good news.

This morning, Joanie sang a song titled "Belovedness" and it struck a chord with me. I feel that whatever was coursing through Thomas's mind probably isn't far removed from the internal struggles we all face, such as the thought, "I've ruined everything and I can't believe in goodness unless I see it."

Now, I'd like to recite some of the lyrics from that song because I believe they capture this sentiment perfectly: "You've owned your fear, and all your self-loathing. You've owned the voices inside of your head. You've owned the shame and reproach of your failure. But now it's time to own your belovedness. You've owned your past, and how it's defined you. You've owned everything everybody else says. It's time to hear what your father has spoken. It's time to own your belovedness."

The song continues, "He says you're mine, I smiled when I made you. I find you beautiful in every way. My love for you is fierce and unending. I'll come to find you, whatever it takes, my beloved."

When Jesus entered the room for Thomas, Thomas didn't even need to touch Him. He just understood. So, what does that represent for us? How would it look for Jesus to enter our room, metaphorically speaking, amid all the thoughts and doubts that whirl around in our heads?

It makes it really hard for us to let go and believe that God's love really could be that big. And that there really is a promise, a hope, a resurrection, and a life beyond everything that we've messed up. Beyond everything that seems like it's lost.

So, what does it look like for Jesus to come in for you and for me? And just be there? Right? That's kind of all that Jesus did. He just was there. And that made all the difference for Thomas.

That same presence can make all the difference for us too. If we'll just open our hearts to it, open our hearts to the reality of the resurrection that Jesus is bringing into our lives.