



“Doubt and Drawing Near”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 15, 2009

Our text this Wednesday after Easter Sunday spotlight the events of the day following the resurrection. We read in Luke that two of the disciples had encountered the risen Christ while on the road to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. They run to tell the other disciples who are all in a house talking about how the women had brought strange reports from the graveside and how Jesus had appeared to Simon and then Christ shows up in their midst. John outlines the events of the following day. From John 20: 19-31, listen now to the Word of God.

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to 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.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, 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.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

I think that it is safe to say that Thomas gets a bad rap. A simple request and he’s branded with an adjective for life. Doubting Thomas. If anything can be said for the guy it is that he knew what he needed for himself, and given all of the flurry and chatter and rumors flying around was it really so much to ask? Thomas is like most everyone I know who wants a little data to back up any claim that seems so good to be true. You say that he’s risen? ‘Until I put my finger in the marks on his hand and in his side, I will not believe.’ Thomas knew what happened when guys got crucified. He’d seen the guard draw his sword and stab Jesus- everyone was there. And yea, we all heard the promises Jesus made about rising again, but if you say that a body with those wounds who we all saw die can live, I’m just going to have to see that for myself. I don’t want your easy answers for why I should believe. I just need to see.

We have to be careful to neither berate nor exalt Thomas’ doubt- it is what it is. He spoke what had been on everyone’s mind the first time the disciples heard the news from the women and then even when they saw him. In the gospel of Luke the author writes, “When (the women) came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the

others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” And a few verses later, when Jesus appears in the disciples’ midst and before any of them can say a word he says, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I...touch me and see.” But somehow we have managed to institutionalize our feelings about Thomas and pass them down through the generations.

So that when a church member sits down in my office and declares that he must be a ‘doubting Thomas’ because he’s trying to figure out where God is after struggling with unemployment for months and wondering how he is going to make ends meet for his family, he gets a heaping side of guilt to go along with that entree of anxiety- perhaps you’ve been there yourself. But I cannot believe that that is what John wants for us to take away from this story. And I can’t believe that this is what Jesus, who himself was probably just as ecstatic about his own rising from the dead as the other disciples were if not more so, was trying to put on Thomas when he said, ‘blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

In fact, I don’t think Jesus was trying to ‘put’ anything on Thomas at all when he appeared that second time in their midst. On the contrary Jesus supplies what Thomas needs without him even having to ask. It reminds me of when God asked Adam and Eve, “who told you you were naked?” when they confessed to hiding themselves in the brush because they had eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and discovered their state and were ashamed. And God before he does anything else, in his compassion and love, made clothes for them out of animal skins, providing for their need. If Jesus had an issue with Thomas’ doubt you would think that he would push him away but instead look at what he does- he draws Thomas radically near. Invites him to come so close, in fact, that he can touch him. With Jesus, doubt serves as an entry point only for going deeper, and Christ uses it to draw Thomas to him in faith.

Thomas’ doubt arose most likely on account of what he had witnessed of Christ’s suffering. And so I think it comes as no surprise that when we have doubt about whether or not it is actually God who is with us or just our imagination that has been stringing us along all this time it is usually when we are experiencing times of trial or suffering ourselves. Surely if God is with us things aren’t supposed to be this hard. Surely if God is with us he is not supposed to die the disciples had to have felt on that terrible Saturday after they had put Christ in the grave and God seemed so very silent. And in response to it all Christ shows us his scars- marks of his own suffering- to affirm that yes, in fact, there are no easy answers. The marks of God’s presence and love sometimes look like his capacity to bear pain with us, which is not what we are looking for. And it is not what we want to see. The pathway through faith and the Christian life is not paved with saccharin but with reality. And our Lord cleared the way with his life.

That is the strange paradox of our faith. That it leads us through suffering to new life. A Christ who was not spared pain means that we as his followers will not be spared pain. That cry from the cross, ‘my God, why have you forsaken me?’ was an authentic question. But do we hear that and say Christ is a “doubting Thomas”? Or can we hear it as an important part of our story of faith so that when we find ourselves asking the same

question we can be rid of the self-ridicule and move to that deeper place of conviction that acknowledges that we are not in this because Christ gives us easy answers, we are in this because he gives us life. By those wounds we are healed. Which is why, I would have to imagine, that Christ's resurrected body still carried the scars. With all of flurry and chatter about how we just have to hold on to Jesus, the reminder is ever before us that the good news that our faith delivers is hard won. But if there is weeping in the let me tell you there will be joy in the morning.

If there is doubt among the disciples here today, Christ does not push you away but invites you to draw near. If you want to see a sign that God is with you and that his saving activity in Jesus is real than behold- his body. None of us were among the twelve there that day, but the cause for our belief is no less visibly present before us in the community that gathers in faith. We are the beatitude Christ leaves with Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Do you remember last week in our text about the Last Supper when we heard Jesus say, "I tell you these things now so that when they occur you will believe"? We all are, in fact, here for a reason. Christ is alive.

I remember back when I was a middle schooler going on retreat one year with my youth group. We all sat around the camp fire and read scripture and sang songs about God and love and Jesus. But as we walked back to our cabins away from the warmth there and into the night I remember being struck by just how fast it got so dark and so cold and suddenly I was afraid. In an instant all of the songs about security and peace and joy that felt as though they would fill my heart forever vanished and I was plagued by doubt. No one for 2000 years has even seen Jesus and all we've got is this one book to go on- one book? What if God really isn't here and none of this is real? What proof do we have for having any faith at all? Because, gosh, it's dark out here, and I'm scared and I feel so alone. Fortunately my favorite advisor, "Ms. D" for "Judy Donahoo" was just ahead. I felt like such a sinner for even asking the question but I caught up with her and out poured this stream of anxiety, "12 people...2000 years...no proof...what if...how do we...we've only got one book!" "Oh, darlin'!" she said, putting her arm around my shoulder. "Well, for starters, it really is some book." But secondly, if only 12 people actually saw Jesus, and even fewer than 12 wrote about him, and it got put in just one book, do you really think that millions of people over 2000 years would come to believe in him and have their lives changed and civilizations shaped if it were all just a story? The proof that the story is real is that we are all here. This didn't all come from just some good idea. Only God could make this thing happen. The Bible says if something is a human creation it will fail. But if it is of God, nothing in the world will be able to stop it. We're all the proof we need." It was such a blessing to receive this gift so long ago. But it was also a truth that I still call upon today when the warmth of easier answers fade and those darker nights of faith or life set in.

Although the doors were shut, 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." Now Jesus did many

other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Amen