

Easter 2 - March 30, 2008
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach, VA
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

Acts 2:14a, 22-32
1 Peter 1:3-9
Psalm 16
John 20:19-31

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago the actor Tom Cruise played the movie role of a sports agent by the name of Jerry Maguire. His job was to represent professional athletes and get these athletes the most valuable contracts possible. His theory was that you can talk about how good his athlete is all you want, but talk doesn't count for much. It is as the Chinese proverb says: "Talk will not cook rice." The character Maguire said that if you really mean it, "Show me the money." That is the sincerity that Jerry Maguire will believe.

Another Tom, this time the disciple Thomas, also known as the twin, sounds off in the same way. However, this 1st century Tom isn't interested in seeing money. Thomas is interested in seeing if the Jesus to whom he was talking had been actually crucified and had risen from the dead, as he had been told. Thomas asked to see Jesus' the nail scarred hands as a proof that Jesus had gone through the ordeal of crucifixion and the miracle of resurrection. Show me the marks on your body, Jesus, and then I'll believe.

Thomas is a spokesperson for Jesus' disciples who are caught in that most awful of situations. Their joy had been displaced by grief. Prior to his crucifixion Jesus' disciples experienced untold joy at being with him. They saw miracles, were enthralled by his teaching, assisted with the healings and got caught up in his timeless parables. Then when he went to the cross, the disciples were so devastated that they could not even stand with the bystanders at the foot of the cross. They dispersed and went into hiding. Grief displaced their joy.

We all know this displacement. It is the day after the funeral when the consoling well-wishers from the previous day have cleared away. Mourners have gone back to their daily lives. The day-in-day-out grind has picked right back up where it left off for them. But it is not so for you. Because you grieve for someone you have lost, you feel that your life will never be the same – and you can't understand why everyone else on the face of the planet can't see things the way you see them!

Jesus held a special place in the lives of the disciples. The late Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen said it best:

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.¹

Jesus was the intimate friend who shared and cared in the lives of the disciples. As the disciples walked with Jesus, and Jesus walked with the disciples, their lives became closely bound together. As close as any blood relations can become bound together, the disciples were bound with Jesus. And then Jesus was torn from their midst.

This all leads to the appearance of Thomas and his questions. I want you to take note that though the word “doubt” has been indelibly linked with Thomas, nowhere in the text is that word used. It is our issue and was not an issue for those who wrote the bible.

Thomas gets a pretty hard rap when it comes to our corporate memory of his place in history. We’ve all heard too much about Thomas the doubter and perhaps been admonished by a well-intentioned Sunday school teacher or preacher not to be a “doubting Thomas.”

An acquaintance of mine has suggested that there is a better way to think about Thomas than as the doubter. The other way is to consider Thomas as an early scientist. Of course the scientist would not believe prior to seeing and touching the evidence.

At the heart of this story of Thomas-the- scientist is Jesus’ generous offer to “...put your finger here...” and to “...reach out your hand...” Jesus’ invitation to Thomas as scientist is to encourage him to conduct his experiment: “Let the findings stand on their on their merit. I can handle this, Thomas; can you?”

With a couple of touches Thomas fulfilled his visual – what he can see – and tactile – what he can touch – conditions for the experiment.

Through the years many of us have said that Thomas did not need to conduct his science project. Based upon what Thomas had already heard about the empty tomb and Jesus’ resurrection from Mary and the other disciples, already he should have been believer.

However, considering Thomas as a scientist reminds us that for some people, to see the evidence is to believe. Prior to the time when I arrived at a substantial faith in Christ, I was that way. I had to see the life of Christ at work in the life of another person – in my case to see the authentic and active love of Jesus – before I would believe in Jesus as my Lord.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (1974).

As twenty-first century followers of Jesus we ought to be glad that the scientist in Thomas won out and demanded the evidence. As a result of Thomas' inquiring tenacity we have the conclusions of:

- an eye-witness to the resurrected Jesus
- an eye-witness to our crucified Lord
- an eye-witness to the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus, through the power of God spans the twenty-one centuries since he walked this earth to enable those of us who have not seen the nail scarred hands or pierced side to believe. Because of the power of this gospel message we are given the opportunity to have an authentic belief that can function alongside the questions and queries that are normal for twenty-first century Christians.

CONCLUSION

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as the rightful successors of St. Thomas, we are the inheritors of a powerful gospel message that begs:

- to be offered
- to be told
- and to be explained.

Jesus showed Thomas his scarred hands and invited Thomas' touch for no other reason than he loved Thomas and wanted him to have the opportunity to believe in the power of the resurrection he had just experienced.

In the modern Church – in America, in this diocese and at Galilee – we are working and strategizing to determine how and to whom this message of Christ must be given. In a very real way our answers to this question will determine how our Galilee navigates its way into the future. It will determine who we identify as intended recipients of the Good News of Christ. Thus far we've identified disaffected Christians as those who are in the greatest need of hearing this message. A focus upon disaffected Christians – persons who for one reason or another have left this church or who have left another faith community – is a good thing. They are God's children to whom we ought to give a hand.

However, as I hear and read about Thomas's heart and mind change, I'm convinced that we may have overlooked another group of our neighbors: those who as yet have never come to any belief at all in the living Lord Jesus – those who stand outside of the family of the faith.

As we think about our mission when we file out the doors of this church into the streets and community of Virginia Beach, the question I want to leave with you is this: "Where and to whom will you go, and what will you tell them? How will you show them the nail-scarred hands of our Lord Jesus?"

Put more particularly, how will your lives answer their questions? Will they see in your lives the peculiar love of God in Christ? Even more important, will they experience the love of Christ from you?

Right at this moment I hope I have your attention about the importance of sharing the love of God in Christ with people outside of Galilee Church. Assuming that you are still with me, and then I want to take the task one step further.

Before we go about sharing the love of Christ with those outside of Galilee Church, we will do well to learn once again how to share it within our fellowship.

I spent a major part of this weekend with a number of men in this parish at our annual men's retreat. One of the themes that came up over and over again was the theme of relearning how we love one another.

Jesus could easily have chastised and scolded Thomas for asking questions and not having faith. Instead he opened himself up – quite literally – up to Thomas' questions and touch. Jesus knew that this disciple needed first to experience the openness and acceptance of Jesus before belief could become his.

As we walk hand-in-hand on our common faith journey we are a peculiar point in our spiritual travels together. We are at the point of needing to bind up and heal the wounds in this fellowship. The healing and binding up of our wounds can and will happen as we learn to follow the lead of our Savior. As Jesus vulnerably opened himself up to Thomas, the risen Savior calls us to open ourselves up to our fellow Christians with whom we need to have spiritual healing.

I want to close with a verse from the old Bob Gilman hymn Bind Us Together Lord:
You are the family of God,
You are the promise divine,
You are God's chosen desire,
You are the glorious new wine.

Bind us together, Lord,
Bind us together with cords
That cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord,
Bind us together,
Bind us together with love.

AMEN.