

First Lesson: Acts 5:27-32

Second Lesson: Revelation 1:4-8 April 24, 2022

Psalms 118:14-29

Gospel: John 20:19-31

The Second Sunday of Easter

April 24, 2022

“Doubting Together”

Sermon by Pastor David Sivecz

American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Poor Thomas. I feel bad for him. Every year his name is brought up the week after Easter. Every year we hear the same story. Outside of Christmas and Maundy Thursday, this is the only Scripture lesson repeated in our three-year cycle of readings.

Even the story of Christ’s resurrection comes from a different Gospel every Easter. So, it’s not like Thomas could catch a break and not be heard for a couple of years. No, he’s brought up repeatedly and not in the most flattering light. Imagine doing one thing in your life and being labeled as that forever. So, how can we not feel bad for him?

As we heard, the story of Thomas began on that first Easter. It was evening, and the disciples locked themselves behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. At that time, the disciples still believed Jesus was dead. It was only three days prior when they had witnessed his crucifixion.

At this point, the disciples didn’t know what to do or where to go. They could’ve believed they would suffer the same fate as Jesus. Fear, uncertainty, and heartache paralyzed them. So, they closed themselves off from the rest of the world. They put up every barrier and wall in an attempt to be as secure as possible.

But not all of the disciples hid together. Specifically, Thomas, who was one of the twelve, wasn’t there. We don’t know why. Perhaps, he saw what happened to Jesus and ran far away. Or he didn’t know what to do and merely moved on with his life. Maybe, Thomas didn’t trust his fellow disciples and didn’t want to be around them.

Then, while they hid, Jesus came, stood among the disciples, and said, “Peace be with you.” After Jesus said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Again, poor Thomas. The disciples witnessed Jesus’s resurrection, and Thomas missed out on it. Rather than being with his friends, he was all alone. Because of whatever reason, he wasn’t there and didn’t get to have that life-changing experience.

Has that happened to any of you? Have you ever missed out on anything? I’m sure all of us have missed out on a birthday party, concert, or significant event at one point in our lives. We’ve missed out because we had another obligation. We can’t be in two places at once. However, have we ever missed out on a life-changing experience for another reason, such as being stubborn, scared, or skeptical?

It’s what happened to a woman named Emily when it came to the church. You see, Emily, for the longest time, didn’t consider herself to be much of a Christian. Her family only went to worship on Christmas and Easter. When she got older and entered the working world, she left what little faith she had and became an engineer. Considering the era, women weren’t engineers, so Emily had to work twice as hard as others. Emily grew so skeptical and hyper-sensitive to everyone that she kept them at arms-length. It got to the point where she believed that around every corner were potential dangers. As much as she tried to hide her fears and anger, it was a lonely life.

Well, one day, her only friend, Diane, called her. She asked Emily if she was alright, and of course, Emily put up a front. Knowing Emily, Diane came straight out and said, “Emily, you seem to have free-floating anger, and I’m concerned for you.”

After this, Emily broke down. She didn’t know where to go or what to do. So, Diane invited her to church, and Emily immediately laughed. “Church! That’s not me. I’m not a goody-goody.” I don’t see myself as a church-goer.” Diane didn’t push anymore but just left the invitation open.

A few months passed, and Diane checked in with Emily and invited her again, and, again, Emily declined. After a year of figuring out how to let go of her anxiety and anger, Emily finally gave the church a try.

With each passing week, she began to trust people, learned how to forgive, and let go of her anger. About a year later, during a church coffee hour, she and Diane saw a young woman sitting by herself. After introducing themselves, Emily shared, “This church is great. Before coming here, I was angry, lonely, and skeptical of everyone. Being part of this church changed my life for the better. My only regret is spending so many years missing out on this transformative experience.”

I believe Thomas was looking for that same transformative experience, and he simply missed out on it. Again, poor Thomas. So, when the other disciples told him what they had seen, he questioned it. He became skeptical and hesitant because it seemed too good to be true.

As he said, “Sure, then let me 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.” What the disciples told him was so outlandish that he had every right not to believe them. When Thomas questioned them, all he wanted was to have that same transformative experience they had. So, he wasn’t doubting; instead, he was digging deeper, questioning, or being a realist.

It’s as though he took Christ’s resurrection seriously, or possibly, more than those first disciples. The same can be said for our world. Some people in this world take the resurrection more seriously than those in the church. Before I continue, there’s nothing wrong with merely accepting what the Gospels stated. As we heard, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Some of those people who believe without seeing might be us sitting here right now.

However, most people in our culture and society haven’t merely come to believe because someone told them. It’s not that deep down, they don’t want to believe, or they simply reject the existence of the resurrection. Instead, they want to have that transformative experience with Jesus Christ.

We need to understand that those experiences typically don’t happen overnight. It involves plenty of questioning, experimentation, and even doubt. Having faith and certainty is impossible. With faith comes doubt. Again, did you hear that? With faith comes doubt.

It’s like saying we want to eat and drink everything in the world, but we don’t want to gain weight. It’s like saying we want a large retirement account but won’t invest any money. It’s like saying we want this church to grow but not change. Faith and doubt go hand in hand.

When there’s room for doubt, that also means there’s room for the Holy Spirit to work. It becomes a breeding ground for us to walk with people and an opportunity to grow. It’s an opportunity for everyone to grow in their relationship with God and with each other. Yes, it can be frustrating at times, but look what happened to Tommy Russo.

Perhaps you know someone like Tommy Russo. Tommy didn’t grow up in the church. However, Tommy married Sophia, who did. Members of her family were devout Christians and heavily involved in the church. Upon getting married, Tommy agreed to try attending worship with his wife.

But about a year into their marriage, Tommy and Sophia Russo faced a real dilemma. Although Tommy promised he’d give the church a try and did, the whole thing left him skeptical. For Tommy, too much of it was unbelievable! One Sunday after worship, Tommy tried talking to Sophia about it. “Can’t we find some kind of compromise on this religion thing,” he asked?

But Sophia wouldn’t entertain the conversation. Her Christian faith was critical, and she wouldn’t abandon it. “You promised,” she said to Tommy. “You said you would give it a try.”

“But I have tried,” he replied. “How long do I have to go on with this anyway? I’ve gone to church with you just about every Sunday during the first year of our marriage. Isn’t that trying? What more do you want from me? Enough is enough. There’s just so much I just can’t believe.”

“What can’t you believe?” Sophia asked. “Jesus,” Tommy blurted out after a few moments of silence. “I like Jesus. He makes a lot of sense to me at times. There’s some excellent advice about life in his teachings. But to buy into Jesus, I’ve got to buy into too much other stuff that doesn’t help. In fact, it’s just too confusing.”

“Take this Virgin Mary business, for example. I mean, come on! Get serious. Stuff like that just doesn’t happen. What good is it? It doesn’t make Jesus any better. Then there’s the miracles and the final miracle: ‘he was raised from the dead.’”

“I feel the same way about that as I do about his birth. So what? Jesus was a great man and teacher. I don’t need all this miracle business. I honestly doubt that it happened that way. Maybe the disciples just made it up for all we know.”

However, Tommy kept his promise and went with her for a few more months. Then on one Sunday, the Gospel reading caught him by surprise. It’s the one we heard today about Thomas having doubts.

He liked what Thomas had to say about Jesus being raised from the dead. “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.”

Tommy Russo couldn’t have put it better himself. “If only I could see his body,” he thought. “If only I could touch his body. That’s the way we ‘Thomas ’people are.” Tommy’s mind was fixed on the Bible’s doubting Thomas for the rest of the service.

It’s even what he thought about when he and Sophia went up for communion, “If only I could see his body. If I only could touch his body.” Then Tommy’s thought process was interrupted by the pastor’s words. The words jolted his consciousness. It was just a simple word. It’s the same one we do every other week. “This is my body given for you.”

Although we might not get to see the physical marks of where the nails pierced Jesus ’hands and have a chance to put our fingers on them, Christ is fully present. Although those who believe without seeing are blessed, those who need that experience still receive life. Perhaps, there are moments where we’ve been both. At times we’ve believed without seeing, and there are other times we needed that physical reassurance. If you’re in that latter season right now, I want you to know that it’s alright if you’re questioning, skeptical, and doubting.

It’s why when you walked in here this morning (evening), you received a 3x5 card. During our offertory song, I want you to write down what you’re questioning right now. You don’t need to write your name on it. Write down what you’re questioning, doubting, and skeptical about in your life, the church, or the world. Then when you walk out at the end worship, place it in one bowls, and release it to God.

Then as we say the Creed, think about how we say it together as a church. Think about how you are not alone, even if you’re not sure what you’re saying. Think about those times when faith has come from those skeptical moments. But above all, realize how Christ won’t allow you to miss out on his transformative love that shouts...

He is Risen! (He is Risen Indeed!)

He is Risen! (He is Risen Indeed!)

He is Risen! (He is Risen Indeed!)

- Amen