

**FIRST LESSON: Acts 5:27-32**  
**SECOND LESSON: Revelation 1:4-8**  
**THE GOSPEL: John 20:19-31**

**The Second Sunday of Easter**  
**April 27, 2019**

**“The Truth About Doubt”**  
**Sermon Preached by Pastor Charles T. Paulson**  
**American Lutheran Church of Sun City**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I neglected to mention while I was doing my announcements today that the reason only Gary and me are here today is because Pastor Lowell Nelson, our senior pastor, has gone to Nebraska for his father’s funeral Friday and to South Dakota for his burial. I have not talked to him but left a message, and I hope to hear from him so may have some report this afternoon at 2:00 – how things have gone as far as he is concerned. So those of you who are visitors, know that next Sunday you’ll get a real pastor. You don’t have to worry about putting up with me in time to come, so this is the time that has come as my last Sunday at ALC, my final sermon after, not 20 years, Dick, but just 19. I had a little break in there between ’99 and 2001. And, I really wondered what do you say on your last shot at preaching to a congregation? Now, I have some words to say at 2:00 today, but my retirement after being senior pastor in California for 29 years, happened 22 years ago. I had been in a congregation for 17 years, and I wondered what did I say at that particular time, 22 years ago when I retired? And so, I looked back at that. Some nostalgia on what I had to say, but I stuck with the Gospel, the sign for that particular Sunday in 1997, and I will do that today as well. Stick with the Gospel. It was just 20 years ago, though, Dick, that I preached my first sermon here at American Lutheran Church – January 1999. Mark, you remember that, too, I think. And I said some things that not everybody agreed with, and I’ve done that ever since. I like to give people something to think about as far as the message is concerned. And so, if you want any more of that, you have to go to Sunflower Resort next year, because I’m scheduled to preach there twice, and I always challenge them there. But one last time here today.

We are, as you know, the Sunday after Easter. We’re back to our regular schedule once again. Attendance is always less than usual. Snowbirds said goodbye to me the last several weeks, and they are gone. So there’s no extra worship this week, lots of places to park. The low Sunday of the year, and when I was senior pastor for 29 years, I always had my associate or intern preach the Sunday after Easter. So many who were here last week aren’t here. We didn’t have some empty pews like that at our 9:00 service last week. Lot of people show up at Easter, and they don’t come, so I commend you for being with us the Sunday after Easter. And I’ll tell you an incident about a person who basically usually only came on Easter. Go back to San Luis Obispo, California where I was very much involved with Cal Poly University, which is one of the schools in California, very difficult to get enrolled in. You probably read some stuff in the paper lately about how some very wealthy parents paid money to try to get their kids enrolled in universities in California. People knew that I was involved with the University, and particularly clergy, so often they would call me and say, “How do I get my son or daughter enrolled in Cal Poly?” And I was able to tell them how they could do that because I knew the Registrar very, very well. He showed up for church every year. His son was a member of my congregation, and the son was a president of the student body there. So, this one year after Easter I was in the Registrar’s office, and I talked to him and I says, “You know you come to worship every Easter, and that’s the only time you show up. Why don’t you attend more?” His answer was, “You know, Chuck, you preach such good

sermons that one of them lasts me a whole year.” Anyone here who missed Easter? Very few. Well, thanks for missing Easter; it left us a seat for somebody else to be there. If you’re going to miss, go ahead and miss Easter.

But today’s Gospel is about somebody who missed Easter Sunday. And I told you I’d use the regular text from John, Chapter 20, verses 19 and following. I had thought about using a different passage from John for my message today, a passage from John, Chapter 16 where Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples and he says to them, “It’s to your advantage that I must go away. Yet I have many things to say to you, but you can’t bear them now.” That’s probably true. I still have a lot that I could say. Now I had some trouble trying not say too much this time. But we look at the Gospel of that man who missed Easter Sunday – Thomas, the apostle. He showed up the Sunday after. Well, actually, he showed up Sunday, but he was too late because Jesus wasn’t there anymore, but he came back the Sunday after Easter like today. The disciples never saw Jesus at the tomb; they never saw him at the tomb. Mary was the only one that ever saw Jesus there at the tomb that Easter morning. We had that account last Sunday on Easter. We have four accounts of the resurrection in the four Gospels that we have, and none of them are exactly the same. But Mary is pretty common in all the Gospels, and after she saw Jesus, she went and she told the apostles that she had seen Jesus. Thomas was probably not there at that particular time either on Easter morning, so he didn’t hear that then. Were the disciples excited – that Mary had seen the risen Jesus? No. Those who were there did not believe either. They said they regarded her words as an idle tale. Fake news. We forget that. We forget that the whole batch of disciples didn’t believe when they heard that Jesus had been raised.

The first time that Thomas heard about Jesus being alive is recorded in today’s Gospel, in Chapter 20. The disciples who were there talked to Thomas about it later that day when he showed up with them and told them they had seen the risen Jesus and how they had seen the prints in his hands from the nails and in his feet and the scar in his side. And Thomas said to them, “Unless I see those things, too, I would not believe.” I tell you now, I like Thomas. Thomas is my favorite disciple. Thomas is my favorite disciple. And I’ll tell you why during the course of this message. I wondered how many Thomases we have at American Lutheran Church, so I asked Diane Lewis who keeps track of all that stuff, and she could bring it all up on the computer. And I asked her, “How many Thomases do we have at American Lutheran?”, and she says, “Why do you want to know?” I said the Gospel Sunday is about Thomas. “Oh,” she said, “you mean doubting Thomas.” Yea, that’s the way people think about Thomas is doubting Thomas. He’s been labelled, and that’s been a negative label for Thomas. But I think that label should be a positive label. Many of you don’t believe the same as me. That’s OK. Thomas is often seen as a disciple we should not be like. I think otherwise. I think we ought to spend more time being like Thomas. Don’t remember that when Thomas was with Jesus before he went to Jerusalem for the crucifixion, he said, “I must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die.” You probably don’t remember. It was Thomas who said, “Let us go and die with Him.” That was Thomas.

John 14, where Jesus talks about my Father’s house of many rooms, I go to prepare a place for you and he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Thomas asks, “How do we know the way? How do we know where you’re going?” Thomas is open. Thomas was questioning. Thomas was honest. Thomas was honest. He dared to be honest. He was not taken in by just what somebody told him. If your name is Thomas, be proud of that. But be honest. Be open and dare to doubt. Like I said, “He’s my favorite disciple.” We have 21 members of our congregation named Thomas. It’s a great name. We have 28 named John, 26 named James, but I like Thomas. John was too arrogant. He referred to himself as “that disciple whom Jesus loved”, and you maybe remember that he and his brother James went up to Jesus, kind of quietly, and asked him, “When you come into your kingdom, let us sit at your right hand and your left hand.” Let us be top dogs in your kingdom when you begin that. But you can be proud to be John. And James pretty much did the same thing as his brother did all the time. And probably if your name is James, you can be regarded as one who is named after

the brother of Jesus who's the first leader of the Christian church. Then we've got Peter; we've only got 3 Peters at American Lutheran. I think a couple of them are here already this morning. But Peter was mentioned more than anybody else, probably because Peter always had something to say. Even when he shouldn't have said anything, Peter had something to say. So for me, it's Thomas, and he's not mentioned in the Gospels like Peter, James, and John.

The account of Thomas' doubting is only found in one place, and that's in the Gospel of John. It's the only place we're told about that event. So John gives us a taste of Thomas, a taste that some don't like, but a taste that I like. And so I decided that what you should do, if you have any doubts, is to check it out. When you wonder or question something, check it out further. So I decided to see if the Gospel of Thomas sheds any light on this event, of that Sunday after Easter. We only have parts of the Gospel of Thomas. Maybe you're thinking, "The Gospel of Thomas?! What's this guy talking about?" You think that about other things, too! If you doubt that there's a Gospel of Thomas, what're you going to do about it? Google it. Find out. You'll find it there. The Gospel of Thomas is included in what's called the Gnostic Gospels, that's G, N, O, S, T, I, C, and gnostic comes from the word gnosis which means to know. We have 4 Gospels in our Bible. Thomas is considered the fifth Gospel, and Thomas was not included in our Bible. You won't find it there, but you can find it in the list of the Gnostic Gospels. You see, the church decided which books would be included in the Bible. Our ecclesiastical leaders at the time made the decisions. In my classes, which I taught several years ago for many times, "What Do We Believe?", I stressed that the Bible is a product of the church. The church is not the product of the Bible. The church existed before our Bible, and the church decided which books should be in that Bible. And probably they didn't choose Thomas because of the label that had been given to him from John as the doubter. But everything we have and everything that we believe comes about because of what ecclesiastical leaders brought about over the years. Our creeds, Nicene particularly, took time and time again to get written because they couldn't agree on what to believe together, until Constantine, the Emperor, threatened them to get it done or else, and they did. Our creeds, liturgies, are based on what developers in the church have come about.

And then there's Thomas. Thomas, not the doubter, Thomas the honest. Thomas did not pretend to believe. He dared to be honest. When he was told about Jesus, he didn't say, "Wow." He told them, "I'm not ready to believe until I see." But Thomas was comfortable to come back that next Sunday, which is today. It's good to be in a community where you dare to express your questions, where you dare to express your beliefs. We did that in my "What Do We Believe" class. It's been said that people who don't have any doubts are likely to attack those who do, that people who don't have any doubts are likely to attack those who do. Those who don't have any questions, so I'm bold enough, and, of course, my last sermon I can be as bold as I want. If you don't have some questions and some doubts, I don't think you can grow much in your faith. I don't. Whoever doesn't have a doubt in the world may be in trouble. May be in trouble. When I talk to couples before I do their wedding, and I did this, Dan, with your daughter. I usually ask them, "What do you disagree about?" And then I like to ask them, "How do you go about solving that?" And a couple months ago when I did Dan's daughter's wedding, I asked them, "What do you disagree about?" And they said, "We don't disagree about anything." So I gave them an assignment, go home and find out what you disagree about and then tell me how you handled that. Then I said if you both agree on everything, one of you is unnecessary.

There are so many things we are taught to believe, things that we should have some doubts about. So many things that people offer us, over the years, to believe, and those things come from many, many sources. So many things I could suggest that you doubt. There's much that I doubt, very much that I doubt, about our liturgies, some of our ecclesiastical things. Yes, but not the primary things like the death and resurrection of Jesus. But there's so many, so many things that we oughta doubt about, the beliefs that people have created

about death and eternity. People say things, and they hope they're helpful. And they kind of become beliefs and theologies. One is, and I'm just going to mention one or two, so many people believe that God determines when we die. How often I hear that. If your time is up, your time is up. If you believe that then you must believe in a God who causes DUIs, a God who causes people to be intoxicated, drive on the freeway going the wrong direction, smash head on into a car where several people are killed. If you believe that God determines when you die, then that's what you have to believe. I hope that you doubt that.

Beliefs are often made up, thinking that they help. I think of a boy who went to Sunday School, but his father didn't go to church. And he went to Sunday School and he came home from Sunday School, and his dad was there. His dad says, "Well, what'd you learn in Sunday School today?" (We sang about this in our first song today, about people going out of Egypt.) And he said, "We learned about when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt to safety." And his father said, "How was that?" He says, "Well, Moses got the people to leave quickly and silently and they got a big head start, but the army of the Pharaoh decided to follow them. So, the people of Israel were heading away, and the Pharaoh's army was somewhat behind them. And then the people of Israel came to the Red Sea, and they couldn't go any farther." The father said, "Well then what?" He said, "Well then Moses called out his engineers, and they built a pontoon bridge over the Red Sea, and the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea on the pontoon bridge, and when they got across, the Pharaoh's army got on the bridge, too, and they started going across. Before they got to the other side, Moses called on his air force, and they bombed the pontoon bridge, and all the Pharaoh's army were destroyed, and the people of Israel were saved." His father says, "Is that what they taught you in Sunday School?" He said, "No, but if I told you the way they told me, you'd never believe it." People oftentimes think that they can tell beliefs which they think might be easier to accept. When my dad died at age 56, and I had a younger brother still at home and in school, someone wanted to give my mom some help about that and said to her, "God needed your husband to be with Him." My mother was angered at that guy, and she said, "He didn't think that I and my son needed him?" We try to be helpful about some of those things.

That's not the kind of God that I believe in. I think we create our own images of God, and we make some very bad creations. There's lots of beliefs in God that I don't have. And there are so many different beliefs. And those of you who were in my "What Do We Believe?" class saw how many different beliefs people have who are still part of the same church. To have doubts but still have faith. There are so many things in different churches. Baptism, communion, and so many other things. You can have differences and still be part of the same family of God and the church. What we believe and how we have faith is not the same. Not believing the right thing, it's not believing the right thing that makes us right with God. It's not having the right belief that puts in tune with God. It's God that makes us in tune with Him. It's not our belief that does it; it's God reaching out to us. People don't see that we are Christians because of what we believe. They know we are Christians because of our love. It's OK to have doubts, but we need to be like Thomas, who checked it out. He did that by coming back that next Sunday, to have his doubts met with Jesus, and he does the same for us. Saint Thomas. The Sunday after Easter should really be called Saint Thomas Day. It should be Saint Thomas Day, but it's not. And the reason is there is a real Saint Thomas Day. How many of you know when Saint Thomas Day is? Even our pastors don't know that. Even I didn't know that. It's December 21, and the church probably put it on December 21 because it's so close to Christmas that nobody would pay any attention to it. Yes, we already have that day.

I said initially I had trouble wrapping up this last sermon. So, I just decided to stop now. But, I remind you, I have yet many things to say to you, but you can't bear them now.