

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
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Christ had risen! The Lord had risen indeed! And where were his disciples? They were huddled behind closed doors in the upper room, for heaven's sake. They were afraid and very very slow to believe the truth of Easter. After all, they had heard the tale only from the women. But then through those locked doors came Jesus who showed them his wounds, and every one of them – every one of them except Thomas - came around and grasped that Jesus had – really *had* – risen from the dead and that he was – really *was* – there with them. But Thomas wasn't there for Jesus' visit, and when his friends told him what had happened, Thomas doubted their story. You may think you have seen him, Thomas said in effect, but looks can be deceiving, and me, why I'd need to put my hands in his wounds and see if they are real.

So Thomas is labeled Doubting Thomas and has gotten bad press ever since. But actually, most of us prefer people like Thomas who don't take rumors seriously, people who check things out and are sure about what they believe. We don't want our politicians to waffle back and forth on issues, to say one thing and mean another; we want them to take a stand and stick with it. We choose friends who say what they mean and mean what they say. The preachers who attract the greatest crowds are those who claim to know exactly what the Bible says. The Roman Catholic doctrine that the Pope is infallible when speaking on matters of faith and morals is very appealing to people who want to know that their faith is 100% correct, absolutely true.

On the other hand, I get nervous, myself, when anybody, especially any Church claims to have all the truth, or to know the mind of God without question. I want all of us to have "inquiring and discerning hearts" as the Episcopal Baptismal Office says, but I want us to do our inquiry and discernment in the full realization that God is too big for us to comprehend, and once we think we have God nailed down, and that we are absolutely accurate interpreters of God's word, we had better look out, because God always has surprises in store for us. As Hymn 629 sings,

*We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,
to notions of our day and place, crude, partial and confined;
no, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred;
the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.*

Christians have gotten things wrong in the past. We used the words of our Holy Bible to defend the practice of slavery, after all. We will get things wrong again. God's will, God's Law, God's nature are far bigger than our ability to grasp them. And so are things like the Holocaust that we remember in all its horrors today on Yom HaShoah. No pat answers will do when God's children are burned in ovens.

Absolute certainty may be attractive but it also can be dangerous. Sometimes certainty is just a polite name for pigheadedness and intolerance. And the doubt we condemn Thomas for can be a good thing. Many of the world's great discoveries have been made when someone has been courageous enough to challenge the received wisdom of the time. It is because Copernicus doubted that the earth is the center of the solar system and because Columbus doubted that the earth is flat that we know where we are spinning around today.

But doubt has its problems too. Thomas's doubt is the doubt of a closed mind, a mind that can't trust or imagine or have faith in things unseen.

"Unless I see the marks..." said Thomas. We get in trouble when we live by the adage, "Seeing is believing." Listen to two rival supporters describe a ball game. One sees a victory by a team of heroes while the other sees an incompetent referee, a biased umpire. My husband and I once heard a lecture about the accuracy of eyewitnesses. During the talk, a man raced into the lecture hall and stole a purse. Everyone present was then asked to describe the intruder. The eye witnesses differed widely in their description. They gave the man's height from 5'6" to 6'2", and he was said to have brown, blond, and black hair. My husband saw his blue jacket; I saw his green one.

"Unless I see for myself..." said Thomas. Doubters can be irritating, always having to see for themselves. Have you ever said, "Sorry there's no more milk, dear," and then watched the dear one open the refrigerator to check for himself because he didn't trust you?

"Unless I see for myself..." Thomas's caveat is irritating too. Remember when your children were little, or when you were little, saying "Unless you take your elbow off my half of the table, I'll..." And he didn't and you did and he hit you back and playtime wasn't playtime any more. Remember your parents threatening or you threatening, "Unless you clean up this room young lady, you're not going to leave this house." Perhaps the threat is carried out and things go from bad to worse, and perhaps the threat is not carried out and the word 'unless' rings hollow the next time. Either way, "Unless" and "if you don't" are words that draw lines and challenge a relationship.

So what could Thomas do that didn't involve a threat or first century forensics? Well, how about believing the eleven with whom he had spent his days? How about trusting them as much as he trusted his own senses? Thomas didn't even try. Instead he set up a gulf between himself and the others. Where was he when Jesus came? Far away, sharing neither his grief nor his fear. Quite like many of us, don't you think, when we are mad at God or mad at the world, or mad at the Rector and stay away from the very community that could nurture us? Thomas "was not with them" when Jesus came, and so he missed seeing the Lord who had come to see him. Thomas missed the big event when Jesus came and brought peace to the disciples, when they set eyes on the one they never thought to see again. And when they told him, Thomas, WE HAVE SEEN THE LORD!!!, he didn't seem to care. "Unless I see the marks ..." he said. "Sorry, men, but it's too impossible a tale. I'll have to see for myself."

It took a week, a week of wandering and wondering, for Thomas to get himself back to the upper room, and when he did, Jesus came through – *through* – the door. He took one look at Thomas and said, "Peace be with you," and yes, Thomas, here are my wounds if you want to touch them. And Thomas came to see not with his eyes but with his heart. He came to understand what Jesus had been trying to teach him, that faith isn't a matter of proof or believing things you have already seen, but believing in things unseen, and that doesn't make you weak or superstitious but just aware that you don't have all the answers all by yourself.

Faith, Thomas understood, comes through listening the words of one disciple spoken to another, bearing witness that "The Lord is risen, the Lord is risen indeed."

So is there anyone here who is wondering if the Resurrection of Christ can possibly be true? Do you have conditions that must be met before you believe? What would it take to convince you? Do you need Jesus to walk through the doors of St. James and offer to show us his wounded side? Do you need a miracle?

Well, I have no signs, no wonders, no miraculous relics to offer you; I have no evidence to give you this morning that Easter is true. Definitive proofs I have none, but what I have I give you – the gift of faith. This Church was not built on seeing but on trusting the witness of people whose lives have been changed by the Risen Christ. It is why we are here this morning, because Thomas told Peter and Peter told Paul told somebody who told your grandmother and your grandmother told you, The Lord is risen, the Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.