

## **Touching Doubt**

Menno Mennonite Church

April 18, 2021

**Purpose:** To explore the meaning of doubt and promise in the context of Eastertide.

**Message:** Christ arises within us and through us even in the context of our doubts just as he has promised.

**Scripture:** John 20:19-31 (I will read)

**Synopsis:** We take a lot of things on faith. Always by a level of degrees, the things that we say and do in the course of our life ask us to take steps in faith, without, necessarily, demanding absolute certainty. Yet in our life of spiritual faith, we can, at times, begin to feel as though a much higher bar is being set for us. We might wonder, quietly, what it means to be people of faith who perhaps also have moments of doubt and misgiving along the way.

Jesus offers himself to Thomas that he might believe. In a much less visceral way, Jesus offers himself to us as well, not demanding that we believe without our doubts, moments of misgiving or uncertainty, but that we may simply know and be met by God's grace along the way.

## **John 20:19 - 31**

<sup>19</sup> 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."

<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands  
and his side.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again,

"Peace be with you.  
As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

<sup>22</sup> When he had said this,  
he breathed on them and said to them,

"Receive the Holy Spirit.  
<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;  
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin),  
one of the twelve,  
was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> 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."

<sup>26</sup> 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."

<sup>27</sup> 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."

<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup> 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."

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,  
which are not written in this book.

<sup>31</sup> 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 always liked chemistry. I think everyone somewhat innately does. Luke is already well established in pleading for anything involving baking soda, vinegar, and, preferably Mentos after a bit too much trolling of YouTube with Daddy saying “Hey; check this out.” There is a lot to like with the right brand of experimentation with the thrill of concocting something out of nothing. If it puts out noxious fumes, is flammable or, hypothetically explosive so much the better as we come as close to alchemy as we ever will. There is just a lot to like in a discipline where the phrase “hey check this out” seems ever around the corner.

One particular aspect of chemistry that has stuck with me over the years is the practice of qualitative analysis. This is where you are given an unknown compound, usually in some clear liquid or another and you are tasked to figure out based on its qualities what it is. I even did this competitively in the Science Olympiad back in the day. It is all done on the evidence: does the liquid produce solids when you add a base? Does dropping something in cause it to bubble? What happens when you heat it up, or burn it, analyzing the color of flame along the way. It is detective work, putting the general knowledge of what things do what under which conditions to work in figuring out what you are dealing with in the unknown. Deducing the nature of what lies within based on the reactions from without takes some patience, deliberation, and careful observation. Its good science, and yields solid results as you cross possibilities off the list in determining what something is based upon how it responds.

I think we bring a similar eye toward proof and disproof when we come to this story of the resurrection. This is the coda—the afterthought-- after the graveside excitement Mary going off to the tomb and seeing the Lord. After all of this, he comes and reveals himself to the disciples locked away for fear, leaving them with the Holy Spirit. But then there is Thomas; that quintessential doubter who lives on in our general language as a fill in for “one who doubts.” He is the one who insists on the gruesome experiment to figure out whether it is all true or not, needing to see the characteristics of the risen Lord before he can believe. In time he is satisfied and duly rebuked, and we have the moral lesson of “don’t be Thomas.” John has taken the time to write in a proof of the bodily resurrection for all who would come after, ensuring that we know that the questions that we naturally would have about this have already been taken care of by our proxy skeptic, going so far as to tell us as readers what to make of his explanation. That done we can take John at his word and lay aside doubt forever more. At least that is how we read this story, both as we have encountered it and, truthfully, to ourselves when we find ourselves in

a wondering mood. I think there is more here and that more is the qualitative analysis of the one who has been raised and the nature of the kingdom that he has inaugurated. I think this is a story that speaks to us about the nature, truly, of faith.

First off, we do well to remember that this is an Easter story. We don't often read it that way, but that is what it is. The first chapter is the very day of the resurrection, following directly on, as I said, to the action of Mary's declaration of "I have seen the Lord." When Mary comes back first, declaring the tomb to be empty, we are told of the 2 disciples racing with her back to see what had happened. But now that she comes back and completes the story with a report that is too good to be true, their response is far different; they lock the doors, hole up and go profoundly quiet. They go into hiding. I wonder what keeps them in their seats that time? John offers the explanation that they were afraid of those who had put Jesus to death that they were afraid of. But that doesn't quite hold water because their earlier racing about to the place of burial and, from another perspective, the scene of the crime, put them in far greater risk of being discovered than going about their business out of sight. What they hoped for, beyond what they had hoped for had come true and now they hide for fear? It doesn't quite seem true to form.

Maybe, though, there were bigger fears at work here too. For these disciples who had just days earlier had boldly declared that it was their intent to go and die with the rabbi, the fact of Jesus' resurrection raised some fearful questions. What would Jesus say to those who had deserted him in the hour of his greatest torment, who had slunk off into the shadows to watch at a distance, denying all knowledge of the man or his deeds? Jesus had risen, with new confirmation of the power of God. Now the disciples might have to face the one to whom they had broken their vows to follow and serve, whose friendship they had failed. Talk about an awkward social situation. 'Yea, Jesus, about that whole take your cross thing...yea sorry' Jesus was back, and this time, for all the disciples know, it was personal.

Jesus doesn't come back solely to prove himself to the stand in skeptic of all skeptics, but rather comes to them all in their most doubtful, fearful time of the challenges both inside and out. Jesus comes to them even here, in the midst of their doubt and fear not once but twice (it is worth noting that the disciples hadn't gotten very far in a week even with the Holy Spirit around) to show them the quality of love that would define the Kingdom. Jesus bypasses all that would keep him out, that was meant to bar the world out, and comes to them to show them just how real this all was. Jesus comes not as the cleaned up white robed messiah, but the one who still bears the

wounds of what was and from those invites them into what is and what will be. It is only when they are able to sit with the awful reality of what was in front of them, and to know the qualities of the one who embraces them that they are able to start their imagination of their even being a next chapter at all. He comes to Thomas to finish the job and in doing so reinforces for the group the hope that they have been given. What they were shown by the qualities of the wounded messiah was that even in their doubts, even in their fears, misgivings, guilts and abject failures, Jesus was still Jesus, loving them, knowing them, filling them and sending them into the world. They received the proof that their worst fears—those that they imagined onto Jesus, our imagined fears being the most potent of them all—do not have the final say over them, and Thomas and the 11 were able then to embrace even the notion that God had a new life for them as well.

How often do we do the same? We are good at locking ourselves away in our failures, our doubts (and our assumption of what our doubts say about us), our distractions, and we can miss the risen and resurrected Christ. We erect barricades against the assaults of a brutal world where the smallest flaw can be exploited for unfeeling sport. We place levees in the way of the deep pain that sometimes comes with a life lived, lest we reveal ourselves as hurting to the world around, or worse yet, to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We lock away those doubts and those fears, keeping them from a church which does not always know how to embrace the doubting Thomas within us all. We think that to be of service, to further the work of the kingdom, we need to have definite answers all the time, or believe a particular doctrine completely, agreeing with every word and comma in the grand declarations of the church and community without hesitation or reservation. For as many reasons as there are people in this room, we lock ourselves up, in certainty that there are simply things about ourselves; dark things, doubting things, things that we “should be” or that we “ought to do” that we are pretty sure new life cannot penetrate, and condemnation would only come if we were found out.

Yet, its worth saying that if you are hiding it from Jesus, you really should know that you have already failed. Being our Lord and Savior give him an insight into the human condition and the state of every human heart. It is precisely these areas where resurrecting power comes to us and flows to us, even when we least expect. It is into these areas where the resurrecting power of the resurrected Christ waits to come in, to declare the words of peace, to begin the process of unlocking and healing yet again, to breathe new life and new spirit into the locked rooms of the

soul, declaring that no matter how you find yourself, no matter the doubts and the uncertainties of life, the mysteries that just can't quite get solved, no matter the pain or pressure or imperfection, God's love stands ready to embrace you, to fill you with the spirit of hope, and to sustain you for the work of the kingdom. God welcomes us as we are, whether firmly convinced and fully committed, or deeply questioning and not sure what the answers are, or if there are answers at all. God is able to work despite our doubts, despite our fears, despite our failings to again and again bring forth the hopeful kingdom of God. Because the kingdom is, ultimately, finally, not ours. We are called to walk forward as we can, growing all the time into the hope and the promise of the life breathing God that works in every situation, every soul, walking alongside us, even when fear would keep us locked away.

The resurrected Christ reached out and embraced his fearful, failing, doubting disciples, opening himself to be what YHWH God had called him to be from the first; the embodiment of that wondrous love that penetrates every locked door, that embraces every doubt, and breathes new life into even the most lifeless situation. This is the hope that we have in the resurrection; that there is nowhere that we can go, no question that we can ask, no hurt that we can bury, that can separate us from the love of God.

May this be our hope, our joy, and our sustaining reality forever more. Amen.