



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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2nd Sunday of Easter

April 3, 2016

“Too Large for Our Small World of Fact”

(John 20:29)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29)

COLLECT: Almighty God, grant that we who have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The Shroud of Turin is a 14 foot long linen cloth that bears the imprinted image of a crucified man. Many believe it's the burial shroud of Jesus. It's not often put out for display, but when it is millions line up to see it.

It has been subjected to a battery of tests. A radiocarbon test, for example, revealed the approximate age of the shroud as no earlier than the Middle Ages. There is new evidence, however, that the researchers inadvertently took a sample from a patch in the shroud that was added later and is not representative of the main cloth. So scientists go back and forth. It makes for interesting reading on the web. Meanwhile, devotion to the shroud continues to flourish.

Of course, even if it is authentic it wouldn't prove anything. I personally don't think it's the real thing. One reason is it just sort of appeared on the scene in the Middle Ages, without any reliable history before it. During that same era, there were some 40 other shrouds floating around Europe, all being venerated.

So I guess I'm a skeptic, but to be perfectly honest with you, a part of me wishes the scientific community would say, "This is it. This is the real thing. Those are the marks of his wounds where he was whipped and stabbed and pierced, and here is where the crown of thorns penetrated his forehead. Everything checks out, and here is the indisputable evidence. It happened the way the Bible says it happened and here's the proof." We live in a scientific and high-tech age that yearns to have faith empirically validated.

This religious business would be a little easier, wouldn't it, if we had more tangible, certifiable proof. It would be easier if we didn't have to rely so much on faith,

but could lean a little more on sight. And it would be easier if we didn't have that little voice in our brains, the one that keeps pestering us and suggesting that our faith might not be true.

And so in our high-tech, scientific world, who of us cannot identify with Thomas? Even though Jesus said the greater blessing is to those who believe without seeing, it's hard to imagine any one of us here wouldn't gladly trade places with Thomas, given the chance, and stand before the risen Lord and see that face and hear that voice and take a close look at those wounds in his hands and side and feet.

On the evening of the first day of the week, after the momentous events of the Passover weekend, the disciples of Jesus are hiding in a room behind locked doors. They are devastated by his crucifixion. And they are frightened . . . for good reason. There's no guarantee the same people who did this to Jesus won't now turn their attention on them, his followers, and put an end to this foolishness once and for all. So they are in hiding.

Earlier, when the women told them about what happened at the tomb, they dismissed it as an "idle tale." Things like that just don't happen in the real world. And so one week after Easter here they are, in the room, hiding behind locked doors. Not much has happened during the week. They must have sent out for food. Maybe they stretched their legs outside at night. Surely they talked a lot about the events of that week.

And then it happens. Suddenly Jesus is in their midst. He speaks to them, commissions them, stands there living and breathing . . . and then he disappears and the disciples are stunned, speechless. All but one. Thomas wasn't there. Maybe he was out venturing for food, or figuring out a way to get them out of Jerusalem. "Thomas! Thomas! You won't believe what happened! He was here! It was him."

"You're right" Thomas replies. "I don't believe you." The Greek is a little stronger, more emphatic. "I'll never believe you!" is more like what Thomas said. "Are you all

nuts? A dead man appearing? That can't happen. That didn't happen. Your brains are playing tricks on you."

"But it did – we saw it!"

"I'll believe it when I put my finger in the nail holes." Ever since he's been known as "doubting Thomas" but that's probably unfair. Frankly, you and I would have had a little difficulty believing it too. Thomas is just honest enough to articulate the doubt. Sometimes I think that doubt gets a bad rap anyway. Doubt is a survival skill.

Last year my wife's parents received a call from Zachary, a grandson. He was in New York City and had been involved in a car accident and needed a little cash to help pay the hospital bill. "Please don't tell mom and dad" Zachary said. "I don't want them to worry, and I really wasn't supposed to be out here. I promise I'll tell them when I get back to Wisconsin." Like most grandparents, they would move heaven and earth to help a grandchild in need, but something just didn't seem right. On the second or third phone call Grandpa asked Zachary, "What's the name of your dog?" "Excuse me?" Zachary said. "What's the name of your dog?" The young man on the phone had no idea. Knowing the gig was up, he hung up. All the while the real Zachary was right where he was supposed to be, studying in his dorm room in Madison. Doubt is an important survival skill in this world.

Doubt is also the catalyst for learning. Copernicus, Galileo and tons of others are famous because they doubted the truth that was available to them. Just about every week, modern medicine is becoming more modern because courageous doctors are doubting the conventional wisdom. Doubt has an important role in the political arena. Especially this year, should we not doubt the character and honesty and qualifications of our presidential candidates?

Is there no room for doubt in religion? The Bereans were commended for searching the Scriptures, to make sure Paul was giving it to them straight and true. Their carefulness was praised. And I hope you listen to the doubts

in your mind if someone were to tell you that baptism isn't worth a hill of beans.

I think there is a role for doubt in religion. I think men and women can speak a little too confidently about God and God's will for you and me, as if they had God on retainer. I think we can become a little too sure about why God permitted this disaster to punish those sinners. Similarly I remember a man in St. Louis tell me he was divorcing his wife and moving in with another woman. I told him it's wrong and you can't expect God to bless that new relationship, "Pastor, I prayed a lot about it and I'm sure God is leading me in this direction." Really?

Faith and theology begins with intellectual modesty, with an acknowledgement that the subject matter (God) exceeds the limitations of my intellect. I think this is sorely lacking today. Many people today are disavowing the Christian faith today because they don't like what God's Word has to say about this or that. Maybe it's gender roles or homosexuality. First this: must God agree with you on everything all the time? I would say only if your God can say things that outrage you and make you struggle will you know that you have gotten hold of the real God and not an idol carved by your own hands.

Second, because you don't like what the Bible says about sex, does that mean Jesus couldn't have been raised from the dead? I'm sure you see that conclusion doesn't follow. It's a non sequitur. How about you not worry about gender studies until you figure out what you think about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Consider the Bible's core claims about who Jesus is and whether he rose from the dead before you reject it for a less central and more controversial teaching. Faith and theology begins with intellectual modesty.

My guess is that many of us struggle with faith intellectually. We put up a good front, but our faith is, at times, inconsistent. It ebbs and flows like the tide. And sometimes it may even feel like you have more doubt than faith. I'm sure that can make a person feel phony or

hypocritical when they enter a church. And I suspect there are a lot of people who don't join the church or don't become fully engaged in a church because they believe as doubters they are second class Christians. Or they think that belonging and being active assumes you are absolutely intellectually certain about everything. You can without hesitation put your initials next to all the tenets of the Christian faith. But I suspect doubt causes tension in your faith. You've learned to live with it. It waxes and wanes, but never completely goes away.

Some people use their doubts as a subconscious cop-out. That is, so long as I have all these doubts, I really don't have to do anything, be anything, give anything.

I know some Sheepshead players who insist there must be some money on the game (a dime a point or something) or else people won't take it seriously. So also with the faith. Your belief in God or your belief in no God will not be serious if you've not staked anything on him. Remember how impressed Jesus was with that widow who gave her mite? She staked even her last penny on God. She was a woman who was serious about the faith.

Jesus would show up in the upper room again, of course, and this time Thomas was there. "Go ahead, put your hand into my side." Of course Thomas changes his tune, as any of us would have. But Jesus scolds Thomas for needing his eyes as a crutch for his faith. He scolds Thomas for wanting more, needing more, but does not abandon him, nor does he disqualify Thomas from following him. For all his doubts, Jesus still calls him to be a disciple, which is good news for anyone who has doubts.

I've come to think of doubt and disbelief not as faith's opposites; they are faith's companions along the way. So stepping forward in faith doesn't mean we need to be dead certain about everything. Nor does God require us to be doubt-free if we are to be saved. No. Through Holy Baptism he called you to be his own child, and he knows you come with baggage full of doubts. So I'm grateful for this account of the imperfect faith of Thomas. If the Lord made

room for him, maybe he can make room for you and me as well. You remember Gideon had his doubts, and tested God with the fleece, and yet God used him to turn back Israel's enemies. And you recall how Sarah and Abraham laughed at God's promise, doubted that God could give them a baby in their old age. But that didn't stop God from blessing them.

That's a really important part of the story. When Jesus appeared before his disciples, we might have expected him to be angry, enraged even for their catastrophic failure of faith. But I'm not hearing that in this text. What I hear coming from Jesus is "Peace be with you." That sounds an awful lot like forgiveness, doesn't it? It sounds like God's perfect love for imperfect disciples. It seems the Lord has always surrounded himself with imperfect believers. Apparently his grace is sufficient, as he promised. Apparently, he can make his power known even through our weakness.

Finally this text reminds you that you'll never meet a God who doesn't have nail prints in his hands and feet. You'll never meet a God who cannot show you where the spear went into his side. You'll never meet a God who didn't die on the cross for you. You'll never meet a God who didn't redeem you from your sin and your doubts.

That God should so love us is not reasonable. But the invitation of this text is to reach beyond reason, beyond intellect, beyond evidence, beyond what our eyes see, to the very depth of our hearts and say quietly, "My Lord and my God." Amen.

